

Chapter 3: Early African Societies and the Bantu Migrations

Overview

Cultivation and domestication of animals transformed African cultures, like cultures in southwest Asia, into distinctive societies with more formal states, specialized labor, and more elaborate cultural traditions. The region around the Nile River, Egypt to the north and Nubia to the south, supported the fastest growing and most complex societies in Africa. These societies are notable for the following characteristics:

- Centralized political authority embodied in the absolute ruler, the pharaoh in Egypt and the person of the king in the region of Kush (Nubia)
- Imperialist expansion in the second millennium B.C.E. as the Egyptian army pushed into Palestine, Syria, and north Africa, and south into Nubia, and as the Kushites later conquered Egypt and expanded their influence to the south
- Highly stratified and patriarchal societies based on an agricultural economy
- Development of industries, transportation, and trade networks that facilitated economic growth and the intermingling of cultural traditions
- Writing systems: hieroglyphic, hieratic, demotic, and Coptic scripts in Egypt and the yet-to-be-translated Meroitic inscriptions in Nubia
- Organized religious traditions that included worship of Amon and Re, sun gods; the cult of Osiris; pyramid building; and in Egypt, mummification of the dead

At the same time that Egypt and Nubia were becoming increasingly complex societies, the Bantu-speaking peoples to the south were undertaking gradual migrations from their homeland in west central Africa and displacing or intermingling with the foraging peoples of the forests. These migrations, and others, helped to spread both agricultural technology and, after 1000 B.C.E., iron metallurgy throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Chapter Outline

I. Early agricultural society in Africa

- A. Climatic change and the development of agriculture in Africa
 1. Sahara region used to be grassy steppe lands with water (10,000 B.C.E.)
 - a. Abundant hunting, fishing, wild grains
 - b. Eastern Sudan begins to herd cattle and collect grains (9000 B.C.E.)
 - c. Permanent settlements and the growing of sorghum and yams (7500 B.C.E.)
 - d. Small states with semi-divine rulers (5000 B.C.E.)
 2. Climate becomes hotter and drier after 5000 B.C.E.
 - a. People are driven into river regions--Nile
 - b. Annual flooding makes rich soil for agriculture
- B. Egypt and Nubia: "gifts of the Nile"
 1. Egypt--lower third of Nile River; Nubia--middle third of Nile
 2. After 5000 B.C.E. peoples cultivate gourds and watermelons, domesticate donkeys and cattle (from Sudan), and grow wheat and barley (from Mesopotamia)
 3. Agriculture easy in Egypt (due to Nile flooding) but more work in Nubia
 4. States begin to emerge by 4000 B.C.E., small kingdoms by 3300 B.C.E.
- C. The unification of Egypt
 1. Strong Nubian realm, Ta-Seti (3400-3200 B.C.E.)
 2. Egypt, large and prosperous state by 3100 B.C.E.
 - a. Menes at Memphis unites Upper and Lower Egypt
 - b. Pharaoh, absolute ruler and owns all land
 3. Archaic Period (3100-2660 B.C.E.) and Old Kingdom (2660-2160 B.C.E.)
 - a. Great pyramids of Giza built during this period; Khufu the largest
 - b. Violence between Egypt and Nubia (Egypt dominates from 3000-2400 B.C.E.)
 - c. Nubia later develops into Kingdom of Kush
 - d. Interaction through diplomacy, Nubian mercenaries, and intermarriage
- D. Turmoil and empire
 1. Period of upheaval after Old Kingdom (2160-2040 B.C.E.)
 2. Middle Kingdom (2040-1640 B.C.E.)
 3. Nomadic horsemen, Hyksos, invade Egypt
 - a. Using bronze weapons and chariots (Egypt does not have)
 - b. Captures Memphis in 1674 B.C.E.
 - c. Causes revolts in Upper Egypt
 4. New Kingdom (1550-1070 B.C.E.)
 - a. Pharaoh gains power, huge army, large bureaucracy

- b. Building projects: temples, palaces, statues
- c. Tuthmosis III (1479-1425 B.C.E.) built empire including Palestine, Syrian, Nubia
- d. Then Egypt falls into a long period of decline
- 5. Egyptians driven out of Nubia in 1100 B.C.E.
 - a. Nubian Kingdom of Kush; capital is Napata
 - b. King Kashta conquers Thebes (in Egypt) in 760 B.C.E.
- 6. Assyrians with iron weapons invade from the north
- 7. After sixth century B.C.E. series of foreign conquests

II. The formation of complex societies and sophisticated cultural traditions

- A. The emergence of cities and stratified societies
 - 1. Cities are not as prominent in Egypt as in Mesopotamia (agricultural villages)
 - a. Memphis, head of the delta
 - b. Thebes, administrative center of Upper Egypt
 - c. Heliopolis, center of sun god cult
 - d. Tanis, important sea port on Mediterranean
 - 2. Nubian cities
 - a. Kerma, dominates trade routes
 - b. Napata, most prosperous city after Nubian conquest of Egypt
 - c. Meroë, most influential city after Assyrian invasion because it is farther south
 - 3. Social classes
 - a. Egypt: peasants and slaves (agriculture), pharaoh, professional military and administrators
 - b. Nubia: complex and hierarchical society (can tell from tombs)
 - 4. Patriarchy in both but women have more influence than in Mesopotamia
 - a. Women act as regents, like female pharaoh Hatshepsut
 - b. Nubia: women serve as queens, priestesses, and scribes
- B. Economic specialization and trade
 - 1. Bronze important but copper and tin rare and expensive
 - 2. Iron metallurgy develops independently in Sudan
 - 3. Transportation: sailboats, carts, and donkey caravans
 - 4. Trade networks
 - a. Egypt and Nubia: exotic goods from Nubia (ebony, gold, gems, slaves) and pottery, wine, linen, decorative items from Egypt
 - b. Egypt and the north: especially wood, like cedar from Lebanon
 - c. Egypt with Africa: Punt (East Africa)
- C. Early writing in the Nile valley
 - 1. Hieroglyphics found on monuments and papyrus by 3200 B.C.E.
 - 2. Hieratic script, everyday writing 2600-600 B.C.E.
 - 3. Demotic and Coptic scripts adapt Greek writing
 - 4. Scribes live very privileged lives
 - 5. Nubia adapts Egyptian writing until Meroitic in fifth century B.C.E. (has not been deciphered)
- D. The development of organized religious traditions
 - 1. Principal gods: sun gods Amon and Re
 - 2. Brief period of monotheism: Aten
 - a. Pharaoh Akhenaten's idea of a new capital at Akhetaten
 - b. Orders all other gods' names chiseled out; their names die with him
 - 3. Mummification
 - a. At first only pharaohs are mummified (Old Kingdom)
 - b. Later ruling classes and wealthy can afford it
 - c. Eventually commoners have it too (Middle and New Kingdom)
 - 4. Cult of Osiris
 - a. Brother Seth murders Osiris and scatters his body
 - b. Wife Isis gathers him up and gods restore him to life in underworld
 - c. Becomes associated with Nile, crops, life/death, immortality
 - d. Osiris judges the heart of the dead against the feather of truth
 - 5. Nubians combine Egyptian religions with their own

III. Bantu migrations and early agricultural societies of sub-Saharan Africa

- A. The dynamics of Bantu expansion
 - 1. Bantu--language group from west central Africa
 - a. Live along banks of rivers; use canoes

- b. Cultivate yams and oil palms
 - c. Live in clan-based villages
 - d. Trade with hunting/gathering forest people
 - 2. Early migrations of Bantu (3000-1000 B.C.E.)
 - a. Move south and west into the forest lands
 - b. Move south to Congo River and east to Great Lakes region
 - c. Absorb much of the population of hunter/gather/fisher people
 - d. By 1000 B.C.E. occupy most of Africa south of the equator
 - 3. Features of the Bantu
 - a. Use canoes and settle along banks of rivers; spread from there
 - b. Agricultural surplus causes them to move inland from rivers
 - c. Become involved in trade
 - 4. Bantu rate of migration increases after 1000 B.C.E. due to appearance of iron
 - a. Iron tools allow them to clear more land for agriculture
 - b. Iron weapons give them stronger position
- B. Early agricultural societies of sub-Saharan Africa
 - 1. Many other societies besides Bantu migrate
 - 2. Spread of agriculture to most of sub-Saharan Africa by 1000 B.C.E.
 - 3. Mostly small communities led by chiefs with "age sets" and initiation rites
 - 4. Religious differences by area
 - a. Some worship single, impersonal divine force representing good and bad
 - b. Many individuals pray to ancestors and local gods for intervention
 - 5. Much mixing and intermingling of cultures