

The Precolonial Period of African History

Westerners sometimes think of African history as beginning with the arrival of Europeans. But as you will read in the following sections, many different peoples were moving across the continent before the colonial powers arrived.

The Early Expansion of Islam in Africa

If you had to name the most populous Arab states today, Egypt would surely top the list. But it has not always been the case. Nor has Egypt always been predominantly Muslim. For several centuries after the beginning of the Christian era, Egypt was a largely Christian country. Historians put an exact date on when that began to change—rapidly.

On 12 December 639 a Muslim named Amr ibn al As crossed from the Sinai Peninsula into Egypt. The prophet Muhammad himself had made him a military commander. And now Amr led an army of 4,000 men on horseback. They carried lances, swords, and bows. Their objective was the fortress of Babylon at the top of the Nile Delta.

Vocabulary



- social stratification
- polities
- transatlantic
- apartheid
- universal franchise
- repatriate
- hereditary rule



An Arab chief from Chad.

Photo by Mathew Clark / © 2007 The Christian Science Monitor

Arabs arrived in Africa on 12 December 639 when a Muslim named Amr ibn al As crossed the Sinai Peninsula into Egypt with an army of 4,000 men on horseback.

Six months later, reinforcements arrived. In July, Amr's army, by then numbering as many as 12,000 soldiers, faced off on the plains of Heliopolis against the army of the Byzantines, who then ruled Egypt. The Arabs scattered the Byzantines but won no decisive victory. Their enemy regrouped at the fortress. Finally, after a six-month siege, the fortress fell to the Arabs on 9 April 641.

Amr's men then marched on to Alexandria. It was a fortified city but couldn't hold out against the Arabs. The governor of the city agreed to surrender. The two sides signed a treaty in November 641.

The next year, the Byzantines tried to retake their city. But history was not on their side. In the end, the Muslim conquerors gave them their usual three choices:

1. Convert to Islam
2. Agree to pay a tax to keep their own religion
3. Face the Muslim armies on the battlefield.

The Byzantines chose No. 2. This conquest was an important turning point in Egyptian history. Over the centuries, it changed Egypt from a mostly Christian to a mostly Muslim country. What's more, even those who remained Christian or Jewish adopted the Arabic language and culture.

This conquest of Egypt was part of the Arab/Islamic expansion that began after the death of Muhammad. Arab tribes began to move out of the Arabian Peninsula and into other lands, such as Iraq and Syria.

Once established in Egypt, the Arabs spread out across the rest of North Africa. Invaders from other religions and cultures had passed through this part of the world before the Arabs. But none of them had the same deep, long-lasting effect on the region as Islam. The new faith would make its way into all parts of society. It brought new military leaders, scholars, and fervent religious thinkers. These newcomers would largely replace the tribal practices and loyalties.

The cultural changes happened more slowly than the military conquest, however. The nomadic Berbers converted quickly and helped the Arab invaders. But the Christian and Jewish communities remained significant until the twelfth century.

The Dispersion of Bantu Peoples

As the Arab peoples spread—along with their Muslim religion—across northern Africa, the Bantu peoples were expanding in regions farther south. *Bantu*, as you read in Lesson 1, is the name of a group of languages spoken in much of sub-Saharan Africa. The word *Bantu* means “people” in many of those languages.

The Bantu peoples started out in what is today Nigeria and Cameroon, in the “notch” of West Africa. They first began to expand significantly about 3,500 years ago, about 1500 BC. This was after they learned to grow bananas and yams.

Another wave of expansion came after they learned how to grow cereal crops and to work iron. The timeline of the events is not clear, but many scholars believe the Bantu peoples learned how to work iron around AD 500. Iron tools made it possible for them to cut down trees to clear land for crops. Their ironworking skills let them make other items that were valuable for trade. Perhaps most important, they could make weapons with iron. This gave the Bantu a military edge as they expanded into new territories.

Scientists suggest that the whole development process of the Bantu went something like this: Growing more food (yams and bananas) led to population increases, and more people living closer together. (Scientists call this “social complexity.” Sometimes it leads to war.) Feeling the pressure of more people, the Bantu would have been eager to find out about new crops they could grow, including cereals. They may have learned about these crops from other peoples, or figured them out on their own. They also learned to raise livestock. This meant they had even more food.

And more food meant more people. That, in turn, would mean more demand both for food and for land to grow it on—and more social complexity. As they mastered cultivation of cereals, the Bantu could adapt to different kinds of terrain.



A mother waters her cornfield in Malawi.

Photo by Andy Nelson / © 2002 The Christian Science Monitor

The Bantu peoples began expanding in sub-Saharan Africa starting around 1500 BC—in large part thanks to their agricultural practices and ironworking.

Meanwhile, as the Bantu peoples continued their work with iron, they had an advantage compared with ironworkers in other places: their trees. Metalworking requires hot fires. Metalworkers use coal today, but in early times they used wood for their fires. African hardwoods burned very hot.

With these advantages, the Bantus expanded naturally into thinly populated non-Bantu areas. Finally they expanded into just about all the ecological niches where they could fit.

Two separate population streams flowed out of the Nigerian/Cameroonian “notch” on the side of Africa. One went down the west side of the continent. The other crossed the Sahel, the edge of the Sahara Desert, and then moved down the east coast. The two met again in the southern part of the Congo, probably about the start of the Christian era. By AD 300 Bantu speakers occupied most of sub-Saharan Africa.

How the Bantu Dispersion Developed Trade and Exchange

The Bantu peoples had two sets of advantages: their agricultural skills, including raising livestock, and their metalworking skills. And because their iron was so good, it was of interest to people as far away as Eurasia. Since they knew how to cultivate a wide range of crops, they were comfortable in a wide range of terrain. They also had common interests with both peoples who were either cereal-crop farmers or pastoralists, who herded livestock.

All this laid the groundwork for the development of long-distance trading networks running between Africa and Eurasia. Copper and salt were two other goods in the Bantu trade mix. Routes running across the Sahara, up the Red Sea, and across the Indian Ocean tied Africa to the peoples of the Mediterranean, the Near East, and even the Indian subcontinent.

Another aspect of trade and exchange in Africa at this point was its connection to the spread of Islam. Islam expanded its reach by the sword up the Nile Valley. But in most of sub-Saharan Africa, this took place mainly through trade. Muslim merchants, rather than soldiers, spread the new faith. Throughout the Sahel and along the East African coast, Muslims traded with those who practiced traditional African religions. The exchanges benefited both sides. The Muslim communities were often found in dispersed communities along trade routes.

Trade also played a role in still another aspect of the Bantu peoples’ development. It increased their wealth. Merchants brought exotic goods from far away into these communities. These goods were common enough that people knew about them, but not so common that everyone had them. People who could afford to buy these special goods had more prestige than those who did not own them. It was probably very much like what you see at your school, in fact. There’s likely some brand of shoes, jeans, or accessory that you’ve told your parents you “had” to have because you wanted to be like the “cool” kids.

How Monsoon Winds Helped Foster Trade

In the days before jet aircraft or steamships, people could travel around the Indian Ocean because they relied on monsoon winds. These are winds that change direction with the season. The word *monsoon* comes from an Arabic word meaning “season.” They blow from the northeast from November to March and then from the southwest from April to August. This helped merchants get from the Persian Gulf and the Indian subcontinent to Africa, and then return during the spring and summer.

Scientists use the term **social stratification** to refer to this *division of a society into layers*. This stratification led to the emergence of “big men,” or chiefs, and of **polities**—*organized political units*, led by chiefs or kings.

The Colonial Period of African History

Colonialism was about money and power. The larger a nation’s empire, the more money and power a nation likely controlled. European empires built up their influence by exploiting the natural resources of foreign lands and the labor of native people. They also gathered great wealth through the slave trade. Let’s focus here on slavery as it relates to Africa.

As European powers competed for position in Africa, slavery was an accepted institution around the world. The slave trade overshadowed other kinds of trade on the West African coast. Moreover, slavery wasn’t just an evil that Europeans imposed on Africans. Many African societies held and traded slaves. Prisoners of war, both men and women, often became slaves. Just as often, however, African slave owners killed the males, but kept the women and children as workers and to bear them more children. This is one reason Africans so readily sold males to the West once the two regions of the world established a slave trade.

However, slavery in Africa was different from the slavery of the New World’s plantations. For one thing, it didn’t involve a dangerous journey across an ocean. What’s more, slaves in Africa often had at least some rights in African communities. Many eventually became part of their masters’ families, with full rights.

The Slave Trade of Colonial Africa

The **transatlantic**—*crossing the Atlantic Ocean*—slave trade began with the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century. Portuguese navigators first came to the West African coast in an effort to bypass Muslim Morocco. From the West African coast the Portuguese gained access to the gold trade of Africa, and the spice trade, too, via the Indian Ocean. For Africa, though, the real legacy of Portugal’s adventures there was the slave trade.