African Societies
African Cultural Characteristics

• Certain common features
  – Show an underlying cultural unity
  – Some scholars have called “Africanity”

• One common cultural feature
  – Concept of kingship
    • Kings ritually isolated
    • People arranged in age groups and kinship divisions
  – Cultivation with the hoe and digging stick
  – Use of rhythm in music
  – Functions of dancing and mask wearing in rituals

• Hypothesis offered to explain this cultural unity
  – Sub-Saharan Africans descended from people who lived in southern Sahara during “wet period”
  – Migrated south where cultural traditions developed
Sub-Saharan Africa: A Challenging Geography

- Large area with many different environmental zones and many geographical obstacles to movement
  - Sahara Desert—North Africa
    - World's largest desert
  - Maghreb—northwest Africa
    - Coastlands and Atlas Mountains of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia
  - Sahel—belt of grasslands south of Sahara
  - Sudan—just below the Sahel
  - Guinea—rainforests
    - Along Atlantic coast from Guinea to Nigeria
  - Congo—rainforest region of Congo River Basin
  - Great Lakes—series of five lakes
  - Southern Africa
Early East Africa

• Egyptians and Sabaeans
  – Egypt referred to the area as Punt
    • Documentary evidence of trade between Egypt and Punt
    • Hatshepsut’s expedition to area is quite famous
    • Products were spices, gold, ivory, animals, slaves
  – Semitics in Southern Yemen & East Africa
    • Created dams, terraced agriculture
    • Cities connected by trade to SW Asia
    • Specialize in gold, frankincense, myrrh
Early East Africa

- Axum-Ethiopia
  - Semitic Sabaeans settle along Ethiopian coasts, highlands
  - Civilization arose in Axum: records, coinage, monuments
  - Great power mentioned in Greek, Roman, Persian records
  - Controlled Bab-el Mandeb straits
  - 3rd Century Christianity
  - In decline after rise of Islam in Red Sea & Arabian Sea
Movement in Africa

• Romans and Greek
  – Both knew of region: Greeks called it Periplus, Romans called area Azania
  – Greek, Roman, and Persian coins of 3rd century CE found in area

• Three movements converge
  – Polynesians of Indian Ocean
  – Arabic merchants along East African Coast
  – Bantu Migration down East African Coast


Movement in Africa

- Polynesian immigrants settle parts
  - Introduce bananas
- Muslim Arab merchants
  - Arab Muslims trade for slaves, gold, ivory
  - Link East Africa to wider Indian Ocean
  - Arab merchants take Bantu wives
  - Mixed families link interior Bantu, coastal Arabs
Advent of Iron and Bantu Migrations

• Sub-Saharan agriculture
  • Origins north of equator
  • Spread southward

• Iron-working also began north of equator and spread southward
  • Reached southern Africa by 800 c.e.
Advent of Iron and Bantu Migrations

• Bantu migrations
  • Linguistic evidence
  • Spread of iron and other technology in sub-Saharan Africa
  • Original homeland of Bantu was area on the border of modern Nigeria and Cameroon
  • Spread out toward east and south through series of migrations in first millennium CE
  • Introduce cattle, iron, slash-burn agriculture
  • By 8th century, Bantu-speaking people reached East Africa
El Zanj: The Swahili

• 30-40 separate city-states along East African coast
  • "Swahili" used by early Arabs, means "coast"
  • By 1st century BCE Arab and Indian traders
    • Brought bananas, cloves, cinnamon and pepper
    • Left with gold, ivory and slaves
  • Spoke African language enriched with Arabic and Persian vocabulary
  • 8th Century CE
    • Settlement Arabs from Persian Gulf
    • Small settlements of Indians
Swahili Coastal Trade

- Trade Winds
  - Monsoon winds dictate all movement
  - November to February: Indians can arrive
  - April to September: Swahili go to India
Primary Sources

• The *Periplus of the Erithraean Sea*, a Greek Sailors’ Guide from Alexandria, Egypt, c. 100 CE
  – "Two days' sail beyond the island lies the last mainland market town of Azania, which is called Rhapta, a name derived from the small sewn boats the people use. Here there is much ivory and tortoiseshell. Men of the greatest stature, who are pirates, inhabit the whole coast and at each place have set up chiefs."

• *From Compendium of Knowledge* by the Chinese Confucian scholar, Tuan Ch'eng-shih, 8th century CE
  – “This country has not been subject to any foreign power. In fighting they use elephant's tusks, ribs and wild cattle's horns as spears, and they have corselets and bows and arrows. They have twenty myriads of foot-soldiers. The Arabs are continually making raids on them."
Swahili History

• Swahili city-states
  – Muslim and cosmopolitan
  – Bantu, Islamic, and Indian influences
  – Politically independent of one another
  – Never a Swahili empire or hegemony

• Trade and economics
  – Cities like competitive companies, corporations vying for African trade
  – Chief exports: ivory, sandalwood, ebony, and gold; later slaves
  – Trade linked to both Arabia and India; even Chinese goods, influence reached area
Swahili History

• Social construct
  – Arabs, Persians were significant players
  – Cities were run by nobility that was African in origin
  – Below nobility: commoners, resident foreigners
  – Large group of artisans, weavers, craftsmen
  – Slavery was actively practiced

• 16th century
  – Advent of Portuguese trade disrupted trade routes, made commercial centers obsolete
  – Portuguese allowed natives no share in African trade
  – Began conquering Islamic city-states along eastern coast

• Late 17th century
  – Oman conquered Portuguese cities along coast
  – Area controlled by Omani sultanate for another 200 years
  – Cotton, cloves, plantation agriculture thrived and used slaves for labor
Swahili Cities

• Swahili garden cities
  – Built around palaces, mosques
  – Walled cities
  – Many markets, harbors
  – Wealthy
    • Built homes within walls
    • Endowed mosques, schools
  – Muslims transplanted many different plants, crops to area

• Gaspar Correa, sailor/mercenary describing da Gama's arrival in Kilwa, 16th century
  – "The city comes down to the shore, and is entirely surrounded by a wall and towers, within which there are maybe 12,000 inhabitants. The country all round is very luxurious with many trees and gardens of all sorts of vegetables, citrons, lemons, and the best sweet oranges that were ever seen... The streets of the city are very narrow, as the houses are very high, of three and four stories, and one can run along the tops of them upon the terraces... and in the port there were many ships. A moor ruled over this city, who did not possess more country than the city itself."
Great Zimbabwe

• Swahili cities
  • Wealth led to centralization of Zimbabwean government around 1300 CE
• Gold and copper
  • Easily mined and obtained
• Capital was Great Zimbabwe
  • Huge fortification surrounded by stone walls
  • Economy rested on agriculture, cattle herding, and trade
  • Declined due to an ecological crisis brought on by deforestation and overgrazing
GREAT ZIMBABWE

• 200 Square Miles

• Built consistently from 11th century to 15th century

• Estimates are that Great Zimbabwe had as many as 18,000 inhabitants at its peak
Ruins at Great Zimbabwe are some of the oldest and largest structures located in Sub-Saharan Africa.
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