

# Sub-Saharan Africa to 1500

Early records of Africa south of the Sahara desert, often referred to as Black Africa, are extremely scanty. It is known, however, that as early as 900 B.C. an advanced agricultural civilization called the Nok culture arose in northern Nigeria.

Another civilization had emerged about 1800 B.C. south of Egypt in a region later known as Nubia, which the Egyptians valued for its gold. From time to time Egypt invaded Nubia, and finally about 1500 B.C. conquered it and made it a province.

## Kingdom of Kush

Sometime after 1000 B.C., a Nubian people called the Kushites broke away from Egyptian rule and established an independent kingdom. The Kushites became so powerful that they were able to conquer Egypt in the eighth century B.C. A century later, invading Assyrians drove the Kushites back into their homeland in northern Nubia. Later Kush was centered in central Nubia around the city of Meroe. The original Kushites were Caucasian. However, Meroe was in a region of dark-skinned peoples, and the Kushites soon intermarried with this population.

Kush became one of the most powerful kingdoms south of the Sahara. The Kushites are believed to be the first people of sub-Saharan Africa to make practical use of iron, having possibly learned ironworking from the Assyrians. The region was rich in iron ore, and iron became important to the kingdom's prosperity. Many historians believe that knowledge of ironworking was carried by the Kushites to central and west Africa. During the third century A.D., powerful nomadic peoples began migrating into Kush, gravely weakening the kingdom's control over its own territory.

Meanwhile, about 100 A.D., there had arisen to the southeast of Nubia in what is now Ethiopia a kingdom called Aksum (or Axum). It was founded by Semites from southern Arabia, who intermarried with the native Ethiopians to form a new civilization. Aksum flourished as a result of trade that passed through the kingdom and soon surpassed Kush as a power. In the fourth century A.D., an Aksumite invasion destroyed the declining Kushite kingdom.



**The Kingdom of Aksum was a powerful ancient kingdom in East Africa. It occupied lands that are now Eritrea, northern Ethiopia, and parts of Sudan and Djibouti. By the middle of the A.D. 300's, Aksum had gained control of the land and sea routes from Africa to Europe and Asia. Present-day boundaries are shown as gray lines.**

The Christian Kingdoms

Kush was succeeded by three less advanced kingdoms—Nobatia in northern Nubia, Makuria in central Nubia, and Alwa in southern Nubia. In the sixth century, missionaries converted the kingdoms to Christianity. In the seventh century, Makuria absorbed Nobatia. Makuria was also known as Dongola, after its capital.

The growth of Islam in the eighth century left the Christian kingdoms surrounded by hostile Muslim powers. Makuria managed to maintain its Christian identity until the 14th century, and Alwa survived until the early 16th century, when it was destroyed and replaced by the Muslim Sennar kingdom.

Meanwhile, Aksum had adopted Christianity in the fourth century. Muslim pressure after the eighth century forced the Aksumites to fall back into the Ethiopian highlands. From there a new empire arose in the 12th century ruled by the Zagwe dynasty. It was succeeded in the 13th century by an Ethiopian empire centered in Amhara.

In the later Middle Ages, European contact with Ethiopia began. Hearing of the isolated Christian country from Ethiopian pilgrims in the Holy Land, the Dominicans sent representatives to Ethiopia in the early 14th century. Strong military and diplomatic ties with Portugal were established in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Central and West Sudanic Kingdoms

From ancient times, the western part of the Sudan (the grassland belt south of the Sahara) engaged in trade with North Africa. The central Sudan also had contact with the north and, in addition, traded with Egypt and Nubia. At first goods were transported by donkey or horse, but after the camel was introduced

into the Sahara from Egypt early in the Christian Era, the camel caravan became the means of transport.

The principal trade commodities were salt from North Africa and gold from the western Sudan. Much of the gold came from coastal areas farther south and was accumulated in Sudanese cities before its shipment across the desert. Later, ivory and slaves from the western and central Sudan were traded for metal tools, cotton goods, and horses.

Strong and extensive kingdoms grew up around the great sub-Saharan trading centers. The populations of these kingdoms were predominantly black, with some Caucasian mixture. Most of the urban people were, or later became, Muslims. Many of the country people remained animistic in religious belief. Most of the kingdoms were urban in character, with complex political organization. They had well-trained cavalry units, which in time of war were supplemented by mass armies of conscripts.

Among the earliest of the western kingdoms was Ghana, lying between the Senegal and Niger rivers. Ghana was founded in the 5th or 6th century A.D. In the 9th century, Kanem was founded around Lake Chad in the central Sudan. To the west and south of Kanem, in what is now northern Nigeria, the Hausa city-states arose in the 11th century. These included Kano, Gobir, and Katsina.

The Berbers of the Sahara, who controlled the Saharan trade routes, gradually penetrated the sub-Saharan grasslands. In the 11th century, a group of Berbers (the Almoravid Muslims) conquered Ghana. Although Ghana recovered its independence, it never regained commercial dominance and had broken up into a number of petty states by the early 13th century.

With the fall of Ghana, the Mali kingdom emerged as the leading power in the western Sudan. Its inhabitants, the Mandingo people, were converted to Islam in the 14th century. The Mali empire encompassed a vast area from the Atlantic coast east to Timbuktu, a Berber trading city on the Niger that became a center of Muslim scholarship. At times Mali had possession of Gao, a trading city of the Songhai people east of Timbuktu.

Mali went into decline in the late 14th century. In 1375 the Songhai threw off Mali domination, and began pressuring the empire from the east. From the north the Tuareg (a Berber people) seized cities, including Timbuktu, and from the south the Mossi made raids on Mali. The empire was gradually reduced to a small state, and Gao became the center of a rapidly growing Songhai empire that by 1500 controlled the western Sudan. (



**Songhai Empire about 1500. This map shows the Songhai Empire in West Africa at the height of its power. During the reign of Emperor Askia Muhammad, the empire extended from the Atlantic coast to what is now central Nigeria and included parts of what are now Burkina Faso, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal. The Songhai controlled important trade routes that made the empire the richest in West Africa.**

Meanwhile, in the central Sudan, Kanem had emerged as a powerful state, the Kanem-Bornu empire. It became noted for its large standing army—cavalry and infantry uniformed in quilted armor and chain mail. Kanem-Bornu grew prosperous from the export of slaves to the north and east. The empire

continued to expand after 1500. (

In the 15th century, the Portuguese began exploration of the Atlantic coast. They colonized the Cape Verde Islands in the 1460's and established trading contacts with the western Sudanic kingdoms.

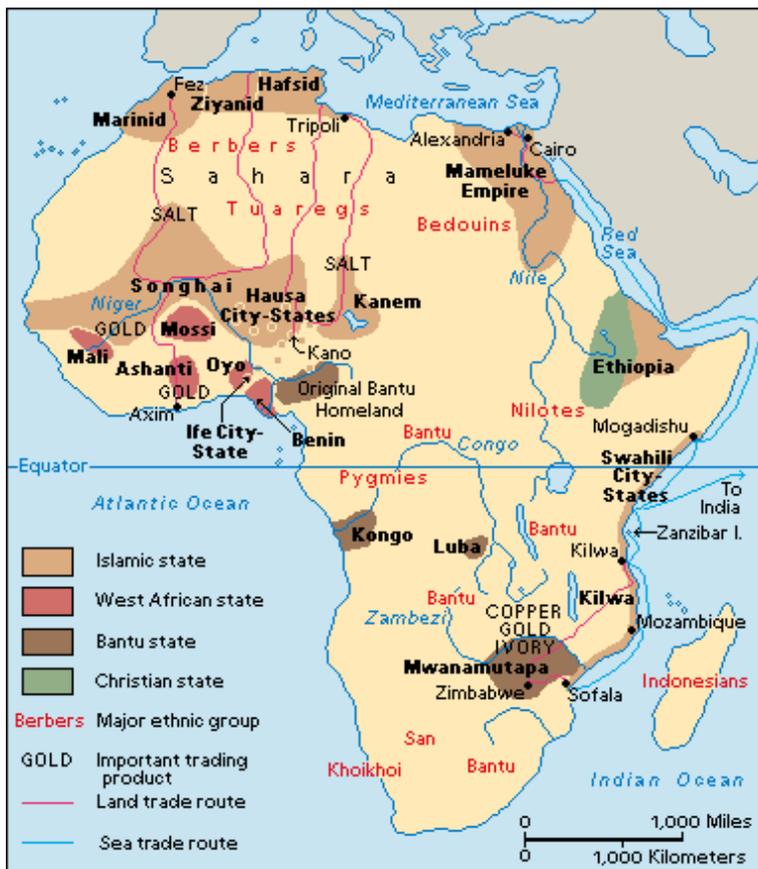
## Guinea

About the beginning of the Christian Era Asiatic food plants, including the banana and the yam, were introduced into Africa. Suitable for tropical culture, they became the basis of a forest civilization. As the population of the Sudan swelled, various peoples at the southern edge moved down the rivers toward the coast, taking with them Sudanic political and social patterns.

Since the Arabs who traded with the Sudanic kingdoms did not travel as far as Guinea, records for this area are extremely scarce. Some of the early kingdoms, such as Bono and Banda along the Volta River and Yoruba and Benin along the lower Niger, were probably founded about the 13th century and were located first at the northern edge of the forest. By some 200 years later they were within the forest.

Active trade was carried on with the Sudan, kingdoms west of the Volta dealing mainly with Ghana and Mali and those to the east with the Hausa states and Kanem-Bornu. Guinea's major exports were gold, kola nuts, and ivory. Imports were salt, copper, horses, and cattle. Cloth and beads, in common use throughout Guinea, were both imported and exported. There is no record of a Guinea slave trade before the Europeans came to the coast, although the Sudan had then been supplying slaves to North Africa for several centuries. The forest kingdoms became more powerful after the beginning of the European slave trade, for which the indigenous rulers provided slaves.

The Portuguese reached the Senegal River in 1445 and the island of Fernando Po in 1472. Their trading station of Elmina, on the Gold Coast, was founded in 1482. A port for Benin in the west delta of the Niger was opened in 1486.



**Africa in the 1400s. Many highly organized states existed in Africa long before the European colonial period. This map shows the main states and trade routes of the 1400's. Islamic states were in northern Africa, along the Niger River, and along the east coast of Africa. West African states were located near the Gulf of Guinea. Bantu states were in areas that are now part of Nigeria and Cameroon in western Africa, Congo (Kinshasa) and Angola in central Africa, and Mozambique and Zimbabwe in southeastern Africa. A Christian state was located in what is now Ethiopia.**

### The Bantu States

Only fragmentary knowledge exists of the early history of the Bantu-speaking peoples, who occupy most of Africa south of a line from Cameroon to southern Ethiopia. On linguistic evidence it appears that they originated in the area of modern Cameroon and migrated eastward and southward. Apparently a great population expansion and dispersal occurred around the beginning of the Christian era.

The great Kongo kingdom at the mouth of the Congo River came to power about 1400. The Portuguese discovered this river and made coastal explorations in 1482–86. In 1491 Portuguese missionaries and craftsmen arrived in Kongo and began creating a Christian kingdom, based on the capital of San Salvador. It declined during the late 17th and 18th centuries.

Northwest of Lake Victoria, Bantu-speaking peoples established a strong kingdom called Bunyoro (or Kitara) during the 14th century. It ruled what is now Uganda. In the 16th century the kingdom of Buganda began to vie with Bunyoro for control of the region, and by the early 19th century it was the dominant power. Further south there were a number of smaller kingdoms—Ankole, Burundi, and Rwanda.

Centered in the upper Zambezi Valley was the Shona (or Rozwi) confederation. In the 11th century the Shona built a city called Zimbabwe to serve as their capital. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Zimbabwe was the capital of the Mutapa Empire (named after the Shona leader, Mutapa), which covered all of the present-day countries of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Its prosperity was based on the export of gold to the east. The empire went into decline in the 16th century and eventually Zimbabwe was abandoned.

### The Eastern Coast

From very early times Arab sailors visited the upper east coast of Africa to trade iron implements for ivory. From Africa came also palm oil, rhinoceros horn, and frankincense. The Arabs transported this merchandise to the Mediterranean countries by way of the Red Sea and to Arabia, Persia, and India across the Indian Ocean. The Chinese were also involved in this early trade. (Axum, an Ethiopian kingdom built on this trade, was discussed earlier in this section, under the subtitle Sub-Saharan Africa to 1500: Kingdom of Kush.)

There is no mention of slave trade in the early records of the east coast. As the Bantu population expanded eastward, however, black slaves became an item of trade throughout the Indian Ocean area. Indonesians, who had colonized Madagascar, dominated the trade routes from the 8th century to the 12th.

In about the eighth century, Muslims began to found settlements along the coast. Some of these were communities of Arabian refugees from religious conflicts within the Islamic world. Others were trade settlements established by Persian and Arab merchants. Malindi, Mombasa, Kilwa, Mozambique, and Sofala—the major gold port for Zimbabwe—were among important coastal cities. In the 13th century Arab seafarers gained control of the Indian Ocean, and east Africa was absorbed into the Islamic world.

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