

Terms for the Study of African History

A list of terms useful for the study of African history, as well as their definitions and significance.

Griots: Griots were Africans whose job was to remember and pass on stories. The majority of early African societies did not have a written language. Therefore, griots were very important, because oral traditions were the only way of preserving history and stories of the past. Griots preserved ancient stories, songs, poems, and proverbs. They are responsible for much of the information we know today about early African cultures.

Bantu: Bantu was a language or family of closely related languages spoken in early Africa. It originated in the area near modern-day Cameroon and Nigeria, but it quickly spread throughout Africa. Bantu-speakers started to migrate to other areas, possibly for more farming territory. As they migrated, they spread their language and their knowledge of farming techniques and iron-working. The common language made this knowledge easy to spread, which greatly advanced Africa as a whole.

Aksum: Aksum was a powerful, wealthy trading kingdom in early East Africa. Its fertile land made for good agriculture, and its proximity to the Red Sea enabled lots of trade. Traders from India, inner Africa, Persia, Arabia, Egypt, and the Mediterranean region all passed through Aksum, usually to trade luxury goods. These foreigners introduced several ideas that were influential in Africa, like Christianity. Aksum also made several great advances of its own, like developing one of the first written languages in Africa and minting its own coins.

Lalibela Churches: The Lalibela churches were eleven stone Christian churches near modern-day Ethiopia. They were established by King Lalibela, a Christian king of the Zagwe dynasty. The Lalibela churches showed the advanced architectural and technical knowledge of the time period. It also showed the importance of Christianity in the Zagwe dynasty, which was a unifying theme for the Ethiopian people in a time when much of the rest of East Africa was Muslim.

Swahili: Swahili was an African language and society that developed along the coast of East Africa. As a result of foreign trade, Swahili was a mix of African, Arab, and Asian culture. The language itself incorporated both Arab and Bantu words. Many Arabs and Persians settled in East Africa and mixed with the indigenous people. This led to an influx of foreign ideas, like Islam, which gained much popularity in the Swahili culture.

Great Zimbabwe: Great Zimbabwe was a wealthy trading kingdom located near modern-day Zimbabwe. Its ideal location close to two major rivers enabled heavy trade in the kingdom. Great Zimbabwe acted as a middleman between the gold-miners and ivory hunters in the middle of Africa and traders on the coast. This enabled items to be traded easily to foreign places, and the kingdom grew wealthy from making the sales. Great Zimbabwe also improved stone architecture, most notably displayed in the giant structure known today as the Great Enclosure.

Ghana Kingdom: Like other kingdoms beforehand, trade was vital in the Ghana Kingdom, especially trade of gold and salt. Unfortunately, its location made trading difficult, as it was far from the sea and the Sahara desert originally blocked most trade to the north. The Ghana Kingdom introduced camels to solve this problem, which could cross the desert without much water. The king of Ghana taxed salt, which they sold to the south, but he was careful not to tax gold and to outlaw possession of gold nuggets to ensure a strong gold trade. Trade was largely successful, because the trade routes were kept free from bandits.

Mali Empire: The Mali Empire was a trading kingdom in West Africa. It grew wealthy from trade across the Sahara Desert. It was also rich in gold and several other valuable minerals. Islam was introduced to the Mali Empire through trade, and it soon grew influential in government and among the people. Its emperors include Mansa Musa, a great leader who drastically improved the lives of his people.

Mansa Musa: Mansa Musa was a king of the Mali empire. Under his rule, the territory and population of Mali expanded. The empire also grew wealthier, because he taxed the gold-salt trade. He used his immense army to ensure peace on the Saharan trade routes. He was also a devout Muslim, which was influential with his people. After a pilgrimage to Mecca, Mansa had beautiful mosques built, and established schools and libraries, which increased the education of the Malian people. He also brought Mali to the attention of Europe, who sought to find the source of Mali's riches.

Songhai: Songhai was a wealthy trading empire near the Niger River. It had a strong trans-Saharan trade, especially with gold and salt. As a result of its frequent trade with Muslim traders, Islam was introduced to the empire and soon gained popularity and influence there. Its emperors included both Sunni Ali and Askia Muhammad.

Sunni Ali: Sunni Ali was the first great leader of the Songhai Empire. He organized an uprising against the Mali empire and established a new order. He was a great military leader, recapturing the city of Timbuktu and waging campaigns against other empires to increase the Songhai territory. Sunni was so successful mainly because of his army, which consisted of talented cavalry and a navy of war canoes. As he conquered lands, he replaced local leaders with followers loyal to himself, which strengthened the government.

Askia Muhammad: Askia Muhammad was the king of the Songhai empire in West Africa. Askia Muhammad was a Muslim, which gained him the support of his Muslim people and the Muslim rulers of Egypt. On a pilgrimage to Mecca, Askia made contact with traders from North Africa, which restarted the trade with North Africa and made Songhai a wealthy nation. He protected traveling merchants from raiders, and also made several reforms in government, like appointing an official to manage the western half of the empire and establishing offices to handle specific tasks. Because of all his achievements, his rule is known as a golden age.

Triangle Trade: The Triangle Trade was a trading network that carried goods and slaves between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Europe sold guns to Africa for slaves sent to the Americas for sugar and other crops sent to Europe. Though it benefited the Americas and Europe, the Triangle Trade exploited millions of Africans, who were taken from their homelands and sold into slavery. It also provided guns in Africa, which led to increased violence and wars.

Middle Passage: The name for voyages that brought enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to North America and the West Indies. It composes one side of the Triangle Trade. At the start of the Middle Passage, Africans were kidnapped, often by other Africans, and packed onto ships. On these ships, they endured terrible conditions, with little food or privacy, rampant disease, and physical abuse. As a result of these conditions, many Africans died or committed suicide. Upon reaching the Americas, they were fixed up and sold into slavery.

African Diaspora: The African Diaspora was the dispersal of people of African descent throughout the Americas and Western Europe. It was caused by the Africans in the Triangle Trade, who were sent enslaved to the Americas and Europe as slaves. The African Diaspora led to the diffusion of African culture into the Western World. Effects of the Diaspora can still be seen in music, art, religion, and food today.

Animism: Animism is the belief that all things in nature have spirits. This was a reflection of Africa's close ties with nature. For a time, many Africans believed in animism, and it was a unifying factor throughout the continent. However, as Islam gained popularity, animism fell out of favor. It was also diffused in the African Diaspora.

Scramble for Colonies: The Scramble for Colonies occurred when European countries seized territory in Africa to rule imperiously. At the Berlin Conference, the countries of Europe divided the territory without regard to ethnic, linguistic, or religious separations within Africa, which led to conflict in these regions. These colonies provided sources for raw materials and markets for processed goods. Africa was exposed to new technology, but the people and environment were exploited by the West. Later on, reformers like Marcus Garvey and WEB du Bois would try to mitigate the detrimental effects that the Scramble for Colonies had in Africa.

Marcus Garvey: Marcus Garvey was a political thinker in Africa. He promoted Pan-Africanism, or the unity of all Africans. This idea was radical, as for much of its history, Africa had been divided into tribes and separated by geography and language. His ideas directly conflicted with Europe's "carving up" Africa, and they were influential to African leaders when they tried to end European imperialism in Africa.

WEB Du Bois: WEB Du Bois was an African-American civil rights activist. He tried to make all African-Americans aware of their culture and heritage. His work was important in the civil rights movement in America, when Africans sought equality and respect for their unique culture. His ideas, along with those of Marcus Garvey, may also have influenced African leaders when they attempted to gain political freedom and overthrow imperialist European government.

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