

Early Africa  
World History  
Kienast

Among the most influential peoples of sub-Saharan Africa in ancient times were those who spoke Bantu languages. The original Bantu language was one of many related tongues in the larger Niger-Congo family of languages widely spoken in west Africa after 4000 B.C.E. (Niger-Congo languages include also those spoken by Mande, Kru, Wolof, Yoruba, Igbo, and other peoples.) The earliest Bantu speakers inhabited a region embracing the eastern part of modern Nigeria and the southern part of modern Cameroon. Members of this community referred to themselves as bantu (meaning “persons” or “people”).

Unlike most of their neighbors, the Bantu displayed an early readiness to migrate to new territories. By 3000 B.C.E. they were slowly spreading south into the west African forest, and after 2000 B.C.E. they expanded rapidly to the south toward the Congo River basin and east toward the Great Lakes, absorbing local populations of hunting, gathering, and fishing peoples into their agricultural societies. Over the centuries, as some groups of Bantu speakers settled and others moved on to new territories, their languages differentiated into more than five hundred distinct but related tongues. (Today, more than ninety million people speak Bantu languages, which collectively constitute the most prominent family of languages in sub-Saharan Africa.) Like the Indo-European migrations, the Bantu migrations were not mass movements of peoples. Instead, they were intermittent and incremental processes that resulted in the gradual spread of Bantu languages and ethnic communities, as small groups moved to new territories and established settlements, which then became foundations for further expansion. By 1000 C.E. Bantu-speaking peoples occupied most of Africa south of the equator.

Among the most important effects of Bantu and other migrations was the establishment of agricultural societies throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa. Between 1000 and 500 B.C.E., cultivators extended the cultivation of yams and grains deep into east and south Africa (modern-day Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Africa), while herders introduced sheep and cattle to the region. About the same time, Bantu and other peoples speaking Niger-Congo languages spread the intensive cultivation of yams, oil palms, millet, and sorghum throughout west and central Africa while also introducing sheep, pigs, and cattle to the region. Banana cultivation was learned by Bantu people as they spread to the coast of East Africa. Bananas spread from Southeast Asia across the Indian Ocean by at least 500 BCE. The banana was easy to grow, and along with other crops, allowed the population of sub-Saharan Africa to explode between 500 BCE and 500 CE.

Establishment of the early trans-Saharan contacts is customarily attributed to early Libyan tribes. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, they traded with people who lived in the desert. This account has been associated with the rock paintings depicting horse-pulled chariots, the first of which were found in the Sahara in the early 1930s. Subsequently, a theory was created, according to which Saharan people had carried West African gold and ivory to the markets of Carthage and Rome.

The real initiators of trans-Saharan trade were the Berber nomads of North Africa who frequently crossed the desert with their camel flocks. The nomads, who resided at southern edge of Sahara, left to the north in the beginning of the rainy season, returning back by the eve of the dry season. While staying in their pastures in southern Morocco and the Atlas mountains, these nomads have certainly met people who, in their turn, had contacts beyond the Roman limes. As the nomads learned to know the great value of gold in Roman world, they perhaps started bartering it from the peoples of West Africa for salt and copper. The gold was carried to the north, where it was probably used for payment of dates, corn and other products which the nomads could not produce themselves. The nomads may have bought also some luxury objects made in the Roman world, which they bartered for gold in the south. This trade could have started only after the adoption of dromedary camels by the Saharan peoples, for horses do not survive in the harsh conditions of the desert. The camels were important not so much as mounts than beasts of burden, for they enabled to transport efficiently both the merchandizes and the food and water which were needed during the crossing of the desert; the traders usually walked all the way.

The conditions of trans-Saharan trade changed remarkably after Northern Africa became a part of the Islamic world in the late 7th century CE. The vast Umayyad caliphate, reaching from Spain to India, promoted trade along the Sahara.

With the increased volume of trans-Saharan trade in the Islamic period, new cultural influences began to spread in Western Africa. The most important of them was a new religion, Islam, which was adopted in the states belonging to the sphere of the caravan trade by the end of the eleventh century. The conversion was peaceful and it had been preceded by a long period of coexistence in the cities of the trade route.

The Islamic traders helped spread the invention of the camel saddle, which enabled traders to carry more cargo. Islamic states also appeared along the trade routes, serving as middlemen that would help traders avoid travel along the entire length of the Sahara. The Islamic states of Mali, Ghana and Songhai (Songhay) were among the greatest of these trading kingdoms.

The golden age of the trans-Saharan trade ended with the collapse of Songhay Empire in 1591. Nevertheless, the trade continued, until the railroads gave it the final death blow in the beginning of the 20th century. The shift in favor of the Atlantic trade began with the arrival of the first Portuguese ships on the West African coast in 1443.