

Indian Ocean Trade  
AP World History  
Kienast

The Indian Ocean Trade began with small trading settlements around 800 CE. The first traders from Asia learned how to predict monsoonal winds and, as a result, long-distance trade could be carried out due to favorable and predictable winds. As trade intensified between Africa and Asia, powerful city-states flourished along the eastern coast of Africa. These included Kilwa, Sofala, Mombasa, Malindi, and others. The city-states traded with inland kingdoms like Great Zimbabwe to obtain gold, ivory, and iron. These materials were then sold to places like India, Southeast Asia, and China. These were Africa's exports in the Indian Ocean Trade. These items could be sold at a profit because they were scarce in Asian countries.

At the same time, the East African city-states were buying items from Asia. Many residents of the city-states were willing to pay high prices for cotton, silk, and porcelain objects. These items were expensive because they were not available in Africa at the time. These were Africa's imports in the Indian Ocean Trade.

The city-states along the eastern coast of Africa made ideal centers of trade. An important attraction was the gold obtained from inland kingdoms. The gold was needed mainly for coins, although it was also used for works of art, ornamentation on buildings, and jewelry. And, the city-states were easy to reach from Asia by ship because of the favorable wind and ocean currents. Ships had no trouble docking at the excellent ports and harbors located on the coasts of the city-states, making it easy to unload and load cargo. And merchants, tired after their long overseas journey, enjoyed the fine restaurants, lodging, and entertainment offered by the port cities. Finally, East Africa was a peaceful region, and the few conflicts that did occur were small and brief. All of these factors created an ideal setting for import-export companies to conduct business.

Many of the merchants from the Arabian peninsula, India, and Southeast Asia stayed in the city-states of East Africa. Interracial marriages were not uncommon, and gradually over the centuries, a new and distinct ethnic group developed, known as the Swahili. Today millions of Swahili people live in the nations of East Africa, where the Swahili language is widely spoken. The Swahili language is a mixture of the Arabic, Hindi, and Bantu languages.

The Swahili city-states steadily grew and prospered, and were a major world economic power by the 1400s. Although the city-states were famous throughout Africa and Asia, no European countries knew of them. You can imagine the surprise, then, of Portuguese captain Vasco da Gama when, in 1498, he came upon the bustling port cities of Sofala, Kilwa, Mombasa, and Malindi as he sailed up the eastern coast of Africa. He and his crew were welcomed by each of the cities he visited, although neither his ships nor the European items they attempted to trade were of much interest to the Swahili governments.