

SECTION

5

AFRICAN
CIVILISATIONS



Ethics and Human Development

Civilisations of Africa

INTRODUCTION

Africa is a big and diverse continent with a rich history and culture. We are blessed with a very rich history and culture that started thousands of years ago. The civilisation of Africa includes some of the world's earliest and most powerful societies, such as Ancient Egypt, known for its pyramids, pharaohs, and advanced knowledge in fields like mathematics and medicine. Other significant African civilisations include the Kingdom of Kush, which succeeded along the Nile River, and the powerful empires of West Africa, like Mali and Songhai, well-known for their wealth, trade, and centres of learning such as Timbuktu.

At the end of the section, you will be able to

- Discuss the common features of ancient African civilisations.
- Examine the origins, rise and fall of empires in the Western Sudanese region of Africa.

Key Ideas

- Civilisation started in Africa
- Egypt is the cradle of civilisation in the world
- Civilisation is defined as a complex society with a high level of cultural and technological development.
- Some common features of African civilisation include cities, political organisation, art and architecture, technology and culture.
- Some earliest civilisations in Africa were the Kingdoms of Kush, Mali and Songhai.

COMMON FEATURES OF ANCIENT AFRICAN CIVILISATIONS

Meaning of Civilisation

In section 4, we looked at the indigenous knowledge systems of the ancient Africans. We saw how indigenous knowledge was developed into indigenous technologies that helped them to adapt to climate change leading to the creation and expansion of settlements. The creation of these settlements led to population growth, division of labour, creation of social structures, laws and education. These developments are what we termed as civilisation. What then is civilisation?

Civilisation is a term used to describe a complex society with a high level of cultural and technological development. Simply put, civilisation is a big and organised group where people work together to create amazing things and improve their lives.

So anytime you see a place where people live together in large communities, build cities, create arts, invent tools, and develop systems for writing and laws, then civilisation is or has taken place.

Dear reader, ancient African Civilisations showed different characteristics, shaped by their unique backgrounds and environments however, the following were some common features of Ancient African Civilisations.

Geographical Diversity

People in ancient times chose places to live based on where they could find food and valuable things like gold. For example, in Egypt, they settled near the Nile River because it gave them water for farming. The Nile was very important for their survival. In West Africa, the kingdom of Ancient Ghana was near the Sahara Desert but close to rivers where they could grow crops and find gold. This helped the city of Kumbi-Saleh to grow. When you go to the south, a group called the Bantu moved from northern Africa to places with more rain because the Sahara was getting too dry. They settled where there were forests and rivers. So, these diverse geographical features helped the ancient African civilisations to succeed.



Fig. 5.1. A picture of Africa's diverse geographical features.

Trade Networks

Long ago, people in Africa traded with each other and with people from far away. They used trade routes across deserts and seas. In Africa, there was a big trade route called the Trans-Saharan Trade. People travelled with camels and donkeys carrying goods like salt, cloth, and even books! They exchanged these for gold, cotton, and other things. North Africans traded with people outside Africa too. Egyptians sailed across the sea to places like Lebanon, Syria, and India. They brought back copper, stones, and olive oil. They also traded with places in East Africa for things like ivory and shells. In return, East Africans got spices, silk, and metals from places like China and India. Trade was important because it helped people get things they needed and share their culture with others.

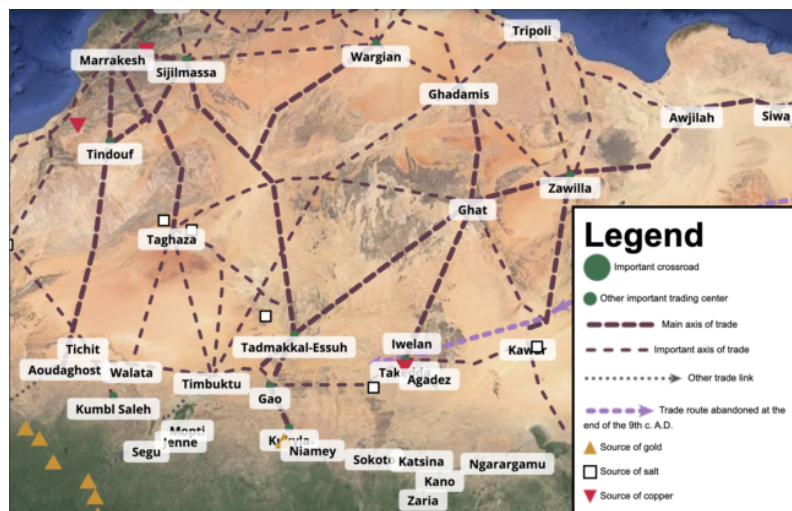


Fig. 5.2. An ancient African Map showing trade routes of the Trans-Saharan Trade.

Social Structures/hierarchies

The social hierarchy of the ancient African societies was from the top to the bottom. At the very top were the rulers or kings. They were very important and made decisions for everyone. Kings usually came from a special family that passed down the role to their children.

Next were the nobles. They had important jobs like being ministers or generals. They helped the kings and gave them advice. Priests were also respected because they guided people spiritually.

The third group of people were the commoners. They were ordinary people who made up most of society. They included farmers, artisans, and traders who played important roles in their communities.

At the bottom were slaves. They were either captured in wars or bought by people. They did domestic work but sometimes had chances to become more important. For example, one emperor in Mali used to be a slave before becoming a ruler. In another place called Bornu, some important advisors were originally from slave families. In ancient Africa, people had different roles, but everyone played a part in their society.

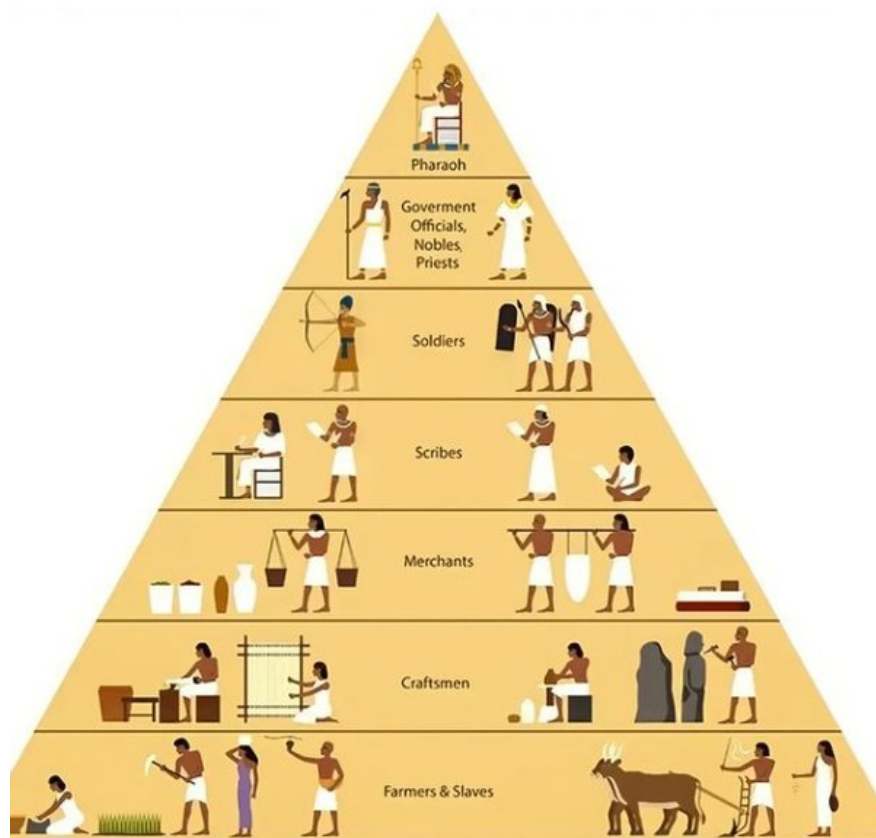


Fig. 5.3. Social hierarchy of ancient African civilisation.

Technological Advancement

Long ago, dear reader, people in Africa were very smart and did many amazing things. They used what they had around them to solve problems and create new tools. In Egypt, they learned how to melt copper and make jewellery like necklaces and bracelets. They also built huge pyramids as tombs for their kings, which showed how good they were at building big structures. In other parts of Africa, people made beautiful things too. In Swahili, they used bronze and silver to make items like coins. In West Africa, they were experts at pottery, carving wood, and weaving cloth.



(a) Egyptian copper cups

(b) Egyptian pyramids

Fig. 5.4.

In the area of farming, some people in Africa also made flat steps on hillsides called terraces, so they could grow more food. This helped them to prevent erosion and also use the land better.



Fig. 5.5. A picture of terrace farming.

Activity 5.1

Explain three reasons why you will encourage terrace farming in your community.

Political Organisation

The political organisation in ancient Africa was made up of centralised and decentralised societies. Egypt, for instance, had a centralised system headed by a king called the

Pharaoh who people believed was like a god. He ruled the whole country and divided it into parts called districts. Each district had a governor, scribes (who wrote things down), treasurers (who took care of money), engineers (who built things), and army officers.

Other places like Ethiopia, Berbers, and Kush learned from Egypt and had kings with a similar system. These kings were seen as special, like the Pharaoh, and were thought to be between people and their ancestors. People respected them a lot because they believed kings controlled good things like life and prosperity, and tough things like death and hard times.

In West Africa, many kingdoms and empires also had kings who were seen as very important. They had ministers to help them with different jobs, and a council of elders who were wise and advised the king. Everyone worked together to make sure the kingdom ran well.

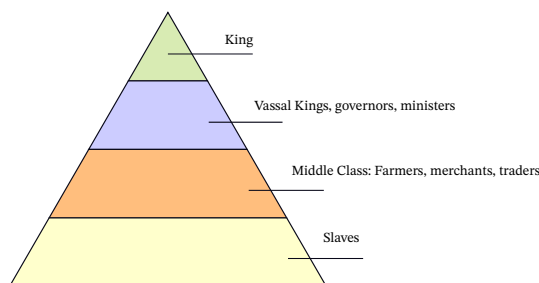


Fig. 5.6. The political structure of ancient African centralised states.

Artistic Expression

African art was also very special. People painted and carved pictures on rocks to tell stories and show what life was like a long time ago. These paintings and carvings teach us about their beliefs and how they lived. Another important part of African culture is Adinkra symbols. These symbols are like pictures that have meanings about life and nature. They are used to decorate things and teach important lessons. In Africa, people were creative and made many things that are still important and admired today.



Fig. 5.7. African Rock Art

Again, one of the most popular parts of the African culture is the Adinkra symbol. Symbols are visual representations of an idea, spiritual meaning, or emotions. The adinkra symbols are not just decorative objects on fabric, buildings, or decor, but they

convey ancient traditional wisdom about life, philosophical thoughts, and aspects of the environment. Many of the Adinkra symbols have meanings linked to proverbs and some symbols depict historical events, human behaviour, plant life and objects' shapes.



Fig. 5.8. Some Adinkra symbols

Activity 5.2

Search for the names of the Adinkra Symbols in **Fig 5.8** above.

ORIGINS, RISE AND FALL OF EMPIRES IN THE WESTERN SUDANESE REGIONS OF AFRICA.

Dear Reader, if you pick a modern political map of West Africa, you will locate our country Ghana, Mali and many other countries. Do you know that over one thousand years ago there were Empires with similar names? If yes, then very good of you if not be aware that their empires developed in the western Sudanese states in the African region. They were called old Ghana, Mali and Songhai Empires, these empires emerged along the Niger River and grew through trade and Agriculture. They became wealthy and influential through their control of valuable trade routes and natural resources. They were also known for their advanced gold mining, skilled artisans, and vibrant cultural traditions. These empires played a significant role in shaping the history and

development of the region, leaving a lasting legacy that is still studied and celebrated today.

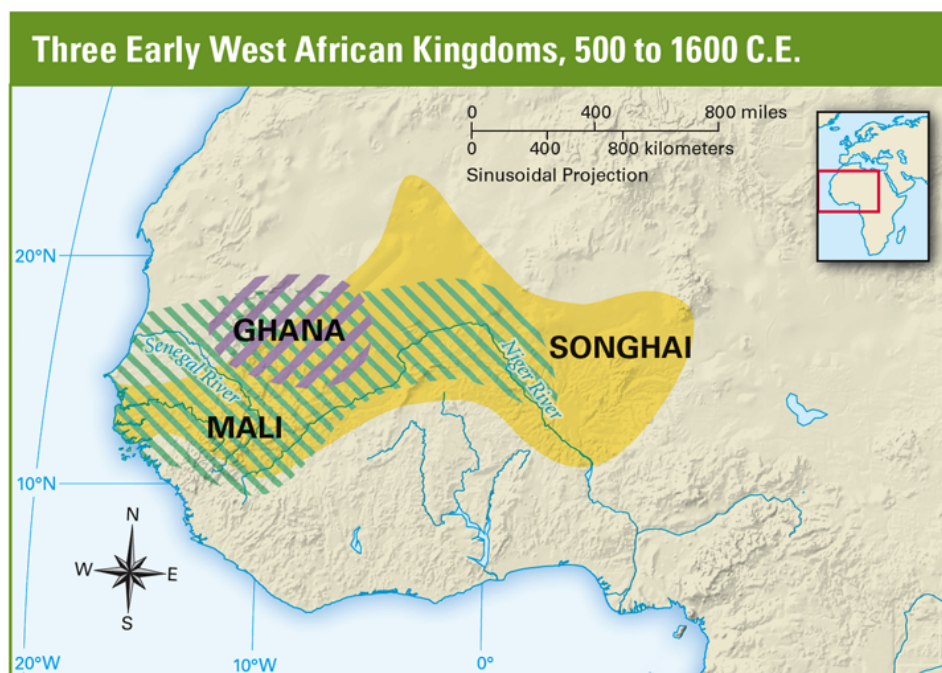


Fig. 5.9. A map of early West Africa

Origin of the Ghana Empire

The Ghana Empire emerged around the 8th century in what is now modern-day southern Mauritania and Mali. It occupied a strategic location in modern-day southern Mauritania and Mali in the western region of Africa. This powerful empire played a significant role in the development and shaping of the political and economic landscape of the area during that time.

The Rise of the Ghana Empire

A long time ago in West Africa, there was a powerful kingdom called Ghana. Ghana became strong and rich because it controlled important trade routes across the Sahara Desert. These routes were big highways for traders to exchange goods and ideas. Two valuable things were traded on these routes: gold and salt. Ghana was rich in gold, which attracted traders from distant lands who sought to use it for making coins and jewellery. The Ghanaian people controlled the gold mines and amassed significant wealth through trading,

Even though it might not seem as special as gold, salt was important. People needed salt to preserve food and to stay healthy. Salt came from the north, and Ghana was perfectly placed to control its trade. By managing these trade routes and the valuable goods that travelled along them, Ghana became rich and powerful. This is how the kingdom of Ghana rose to greatness.

Fall of Ghana Empire

By the 11th century, internal strife, external pressures and economic decline led to the weakening of Ghana. The Almoravids, a militant Islamic group, disrupted trade routes and contributed to its downfall.

Activity 5.3

Look at the political Map of West Africa below and locate southern Mauritanian and Mali to determine the origin of the old Ghana Empire.



Fig. 5.10. West Africa Map

Origins of the Mali Empire

The Mali Empire was a powerful and influential West African kingdom that thrived from the 13th to the 16th century. It is renowned for its wealth, culture, and significant contributions to African history.

The Rise of the Mali Empire

The Mali Empire was founded by Sundiata Keita in the early 13th century. Sundiata, also known as the “Lion King,” united several smaller states to form a vast and powerful empire. Under his leadership, Mali expanded its territory and became a dominant force in West Africa. The Mali Empire reached its peak during the reign of Mansa Musa, one of the richest and most famous rulers in history. Mansa Musa ruled from 1312 to 1337 and is best known for his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. During this journey, he distributed so much gold that it affected the economy of the regions he passed through.

Under Mansa Musa’s rule, the empire succeeded. He established Timbuktu as a centre of learning and culture, attracting scholars, artists, and traders from all over the world.

The empire's wealth was largely based on the trade of gold, salt, and other valuable goods.

The Mali Empire controlled important trade routes across the Sahara Desert. These routes connected West Africa to North Africa and the Mediterranean, helping the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture. The empire's wealth was also boosted by its rich natural resources, particularly gold mines.

Fall of Mali Empire

The Mali Empire became weaker and eventually fell because of problems from inside and outside the empire. After Mansa Musa's death, the Mali Empire began to decline. Successive rulers struggled to maintain control over the vast territory, and internal conflicts weakened the empire. Additionally, external pressures from neighbouring states and invasions contributed to its decline.

By the late 16th century, the Mali Empire had split into smaller states, losing much of its former power and influence.

Legacy

Despite its decline, the Mali Empire left a legacy. It is remembered for its contributions to African culture, education, and trade. The empire's achievements in architecture, learning, and governance influenced many later civilizations in West Africa.

The story of the Mali Empire, particularly the tales of Sundiata Keita and Mansa Musa, continues to inspire and captivate people around the world, highlighting the rich history and heritage of West Africa.

Activity 5.4

Discuss with your friend any three reasons why Mali replaced the Ghana Empire.

Origin of the Songhai Empire

The Songhai Empire was a powerful West African kingdom that existed from the 15th to the 16th century. It was one of the largest empires in African history and was in the region that is now Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.

The Songhai Empire succeeded the Mali Empire. After the decline of the Mali Empire in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the Songhai Empire rose to fame. It became the main power in West Africa and expanded its territory significantly.

Rise of the Songhai Empire

The Songhai people initially lived under the rule of the Mali Empire but gradually gained independence. Gao, the capital of Songhai, became an important centre for trade and culture. Under the leadership of Sunni Ali, who ruled from 1464 to 1492, the Songhai Empire expanded its territory by conquering key regions and cities, including Timbuktu and Djenne.

After Sunni Ali, Askia Muhammad came to power and ruled from 1493 to 1528. He is considered one of the greatest rulers of the Songhai Empire. Askia Muhammad reformed the government, strengthened the military, and promoted Islam as the state religion. He also encouraged education and scholarship, making Timbuktu a renowned center for learning and culture once again.

Similar to the Mali Empire, the Songhai Empire's wealth was based on trade. They controlled important trade routes across the Sahara Desert, facilitating the exchange of goods like gold, salt, and other valuable commodities. The empire's prosperity attracted merchants and scholars from various regions.

The Fall of the Songhai Empire.

The Songhai Empire began to decline in the late 16th century due to internal conflicts and external pressures. In 1591, a Moroccan army invaded the empire with advanced firearms and defeated the Songhai forces in the Battle of Tondibi. This invasion marked the end of the Songhai Empire as a dominant power in West Africa.

Legacy

The Songhai Empire left a significant legacy in West African history. It played a crucial role in the development of trade, culture, and education in the region. The achievements of the Songhai rulers, especially Sunni Ali and Askia Muhammad, continue to be remembered and celebrated as part of Africa's rich historical heritage.

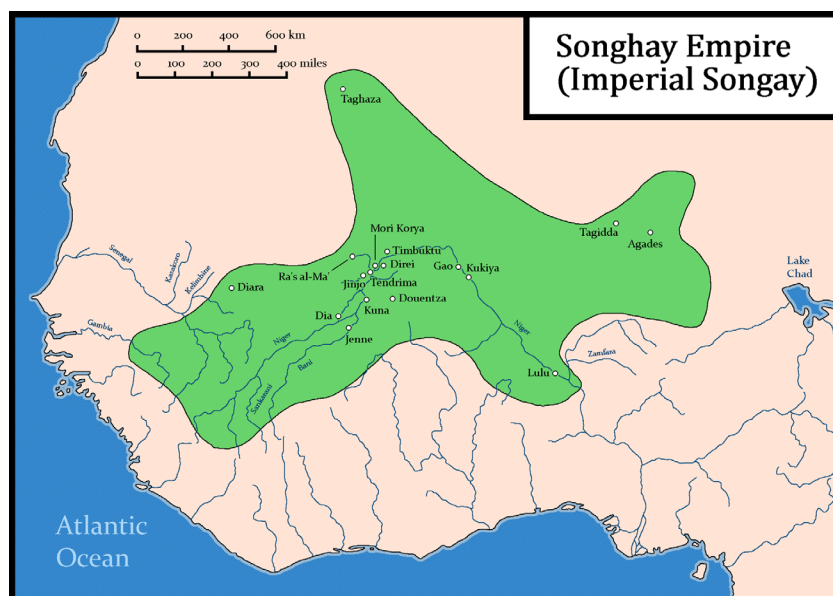


Fig. 5.11. Map of Songhai Empire.

Activity 5.5

Discuss with your friend any three reasons why Timbuktu was considered a famous town in the Songhai empire.

The Impact of These Empires on Africa

Dear reader, the Ghana, Mali, and Songhai Empires were three prominent West African civilisations that grew between the 9th and 16th centuries. Each played a crucial role in the region's economic, cultural, and political development.

Ghana Empire

- a. **Economic Impact:** The Ghana Empire known as the “Land of Gold” was a major trading centre that controlled the trans-Saharan trade routes. It traded gold, ivory, and salt with North African and Arab traders, significantly boosting its wealth and influence.
- b. **Political Impact:** The empire's centralised government and powerful kings maintained a strong military to protect trade routes and their territory. This political stability raised economic growth and cultural development.
- c. **Cultural Impact:** Ghana's wealth attracted scholars, merchants, and travellers, facilitating cultural exchange. The introduction of Islam by Muslim traders influenced Ghana's culture, legal systems, and education.

Mali Empire

- a. **Economic Impact:** Mali surpassed Ghana in wealth and influence, becoming renowned for its gold production. The empire's strategic location enabled it to control and tax trade routes, which contributed to its prosperity.
- b. **Political Impact:** Under leaders like Sundiata Keita and Mansa Musa, Mali expanded its territory and established a strong central government. Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 showcased Mali's wealth and increased its global prestige.
- c. **Cultural Impact:** Mali was a centre of learning and culture. Timbuktu, one of its cities, became a renowned intellectual and cultural hub with numerous mosques, universities, and libraries. The spread of Islam continued to shape Mali's culture and society.

Songhai Empire

- a. **Economic Impact:** The Songhai Empire became the largest and most powerful West African empire by controlling trade routes and cities like Timbuktu and Gao. Its economy thrived on trade, agriculture, and tribute from conquered regions.

- b. Political Impact:** Under leaders such as Sunni Ali and Askia Muhammad, Songhai expanded its territory and established a well-organized administration. Askia Muhammad's reforms strengthened the empire's governance, legal systems, and military.
- c. Cultural Impact:** Songhai continued the inheritance of Mali by promoting education and Islamic scholarship. Timbuktu remained a significant centre for learning, attracting scholars from across the Islamic world. The empire's cultural and intellectual contributions left a legacy in West Africa.

Dear reader, it is now clear to you that these three empires significantly impacted West Africa through their control of trade routes, economic prosperity, political stability, and cultural contributions. Their legacies include the spread of Islam, the establishment of educational centres, and the development of cultured political and social systems that influenced successive African civilisations.

Review Questions

1. Egypt was the centre of civilisation in the world. Discuss
2. How common were the features of ancient African civilisation?
3. How was trade a key to ancient African civilisations?
4. Why was ancient Ghana the first Empire to rise in the Western Sudanese regions of West Africa?
5. What were the reasons that contributed to the fall of the Mali Empire?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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