

SNAPSHOT

African History

HIST3010

An African Snapshot before 1500

Many historians would argue that demolishing stereotypes about African passivity is a positive intervention. But if we focus exclusively on African agency we run the risk of ignoring unequal power relations and structural inequality. This is because the unequal power balances are very important in informing us on the shaping of African history. The challenge is to adopt an approach that acknowledges both human action and the structural constraints on that action.

We are all Africans- we can all trace our lineage back to Africa. It is where we evolved.

For historian John Iliffe, the central themes of African history are: 'the peopling of the continent, the achievement of human coexistence with nature, the building up of enduring societies, and their defence against aggression from more favoured regions.

In a nutshell, over many millennia prior to 1500 Africans spread through the continent adapted themselves to diverse environments and formed distinct ethnic and linguistic groups. However, the continent's environmental challenges limited population growth; so much so that Africa remained relatively under-populated until the late 20th C. (Iliffe, 2007) Control of people and population growth becomes crucial for African communities. Social organisation is aimed to maximise fertility (polygamy is common) and so the dynamic of the generation conflict assumed special historical significance.

The wealthier you were the more you could marry and the more people you could control through forging alliances.

There is little exchange between the communities. So there is a really large diversity linguistically.

Political developments: Low population means that it is very difficult to build everything that you need for a state. Also those with more dense population had little incentive to supply a surplus to ruling classes as long as empty land allowed them to escape political authority. Thus in many cases areas remained stateless.

In West Africa political developments do take place. The empire of Mali began as a cluster of *Kafus* (group of villages). This state rapidly expanded during the 13th C, but always struggled to maintain centralised authority. By the 15th C Timbuktu had been conquered by Tuareg nomads, whilst pastoralists in the west increasingly defied Mali's rulers. Disintegration was almost complete once Mali lost the Bambuk

goldfields. The loss of Bambuk was catastrophic because in many respects gold, along with trade, had sustained the empire since its inception. Mali contained three goldfields, and thus held half of the gold in the old world at that time. It taxed every ounce of gold, and also taxed salt and other goods that entered its borders, generating substantial revenues. Without these revenues Mali's political, cultural and economic achievements and influence would not have been possible.

State formation and trade in East Africa: One of the essential environmental conditions that allowed these networks to develop was the monsoon. Alternating monsoonal winds linked Africa, Arabia and India. The monsoonal winds were very predictable and reliable, allowing sure travel and thus creating a dense trading network. Land of Zanj – important trading region. It was a string of city states and merchants in these centres bought a range of commodities from the African interior and sold them to merchants from across the region.