

Introduction

Uncovering Africa's Past

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Every academic year, many high school and college students are introduced to African history for the first time. Some of the introductory lessons focus on the contributions of African kingdoms and states to world civilization. Instructors focus on kingdoms and empires for one main reason—they offer a critical window into African civilizations and the broader experiences of Africans over time, place, and space. Although textbooks on African history are legion, most of them treat African kingdoms cursorily and as part of a general survey of Africa, covering many centuries and thousands of ethnic groups. Some excellent academic monographs on specific kingdoms also exist. However, they are largely unsuitable for nonspecialist audiences and high school and college undergraduate students who need an accessible body of knowledge to fulfill general education requirement of the school curriculum or satisfy personal curiosity about non-Western societies.

African Kingdoms: An Encyclopedia of Empires and Civilizations addresses this deficiency and helps students learn more about several other kingdoms missing in most textbooks. More so, students and instructors will have core information on the exploits of each kingdom, state, and empire, comparing and contrasting how migration, geography, political processes, and other internal and external factors shaped popular history and consciousness. Students encountering African history for the first time and those taking world civilization courses will not have to scavenge through tons of library books to fully grasp the contributions of Africa to human civilization. *African Kingdoms: An Encyclopedia of Empires and Civilizations* offers a useful entry into researching broader African history by providing students with a handy source capable of initiating and sustaining critical thinking about comparative and cross-cultural civilizations. Materials in this encyclopedia include contemporary/modern reenactments of kingdoms in popular culture, movies, and arts. It is important to link the past with the present not just because this helps to emphasize the importance of historical events in shaping current thoughts but also because it is one of the best means of generating critical and culturally sensitive debate about the civilizations and achievements of the people of the past.

This encyclopedia draws on primary and secondary sources produced by both Africans and non-Africans. Contributors use popular oral traditions to corroborate and/or cross-examine documented information. Other useful bodies of material are derived from archaeology, arts, and written traveling accounts of European

explorers, missionaries, and travelers who visited Africa. The life spans of the kingdoms and empires included in this encyclopedia vary widely. While some emerged thousands of years ago and survived until the European invasion of the 19th century, others came into prominence at the beginning of the 19th century and ceased to exist by the end of that century. Yet some have managed to survive up to the present day, undergoing significant cultural, political, and geographical changes wrought by colonialism and postcolonial quagmire. Regardless, the entries in this volume attempt to map out the changing geographies and cultural impacts of notable African kingdoms and states before European conquest of the 19th century. Some entries also detail the impact of colonial rule and postcolonial transformation within the context of the rise of modern states in Africa.

African Kingdoms: An Encyclopedia of Empires and Civilizations offers more than a critical insight into African politics, indigenous science and medicine, society, arts, customs, architecture, and military. This volume also renders a useful perspective on globalization. The entries situate the experiences of people of each kingdom, state, and community within regional and global histories of commerce, trade, and the exchange of ideas over several centuries. From ancient times, humans across time and place have shared customs ranging from food, language, and music to religion and spirituality. The massive movement of people across natural and artificial barriers permitted the flow of ideas, some of which have survived to today. This book thus sheds light on the foundations of modern globalization. The rise and fall and the expansion and contraction of kingdoms had strong implications for both internal and external African social structures. What is more, African kingdoms played a significant role in shaping Atlantic ideas before, during, and after the demise of the infamous transatlantic slave trade.

African Civilization in a Time Perspective: State and Empire Building in Africa

Until the second half of the 20th century, the study of African civilizations did not occupy a strategic position in academic discourse. The origins of this problem can be traced to the assumption that Africa did not have a civilization popularized by colonialists. European imperialists minimized (and in some cases completely denied) the contributions of Africans to the global history of humanity, science, technology, arts, literature, and leisure. The assumption that Africa did not have a civilization and or even a history was fueled in part by a Eurocentric conception of the term "civilization." The European colonialists who shaped the global perception toward the continent's history and culture tended to define civilization from their own prejudiced perspective. They believed that societies, which did not have their own historical artifacts, did not document the past in written form or conduct politics and organize society as the colonialists did and thus did not have a civilization. Slavery and the transatlantic slave trade contributed immensely to shaping a racialized perception of Africa. The dehumanization of Africans as objects of sale went hand in hand with the mischaracterization of the society that produced them as inferior, static, and unprogressive.

But from the early 1950s, significant archaeological discoveries and the works of local historians who documented their societies' histories in written form provided the fulcrum on which rested what I call the deracialization of African civilization. Archaeological research from the early 20th century has confirmed that Africa is the birthplace of humankind. Evidence from bone fragments and fossil skulls established that the earliest human ancestors probably lived in the high plains of Eastern Africa about 2 million years ago. In a site known as Olduvai Gorge in modern-day northern Tanzania, the earliest humans learned to make, shape, and use weapons and tools of stone to hunt a variety of game animals. Little is known about the daily lives of these first human inhabitants of the world. What is certain is that about 1 million years ago their population had increased. Remarkable differences in their body structure and shape were becoming apparent. It would appear that the core differences in bone structure, skin color, and other body and attitudinal features were formed about 30,000 years ago. Changes in the African climate, characterized by the shifting polar ice caps from wet to very dry, may have been responsible for the different looks that humans across Africa and beyond began to exhibit. Historians do not agree on the exact time that the earliest humans began to migrate out of Africa. What is certain is that they lived around well-watered areas and migrated eastwardly through the Middle East and India, into the various islands between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and eventually into Australia. As humans migrated outside Africa, they began to adapt to the natural environment of their new abode.

The history of the early human is patchy due to the absence of written records; however, it is certain that the first attempt by humans to transform the natural environment to meet their needs started in Africa. The basic needs of early Africans expanded from food and shelter to religion and spirituality, military expansion, music, architecture, and knowledge production. Indeed, the remarkable sophistication of African architecture and the African knowledge system, which both Africans and non-Africans began to document in written form from the 12th century (or earlier), took several centuries of cultural, scientific, and artistic evolution. Some of the early European explorers of Africa from the 15th century accepted the truth about African civilization, which many others after them would deny. After sailing their ships down the South Atlantic and around the Cape of Good Hope in 1498, Vasco da Gama and his men were amazed by tall stone towns of wealth and comfort along the east coast of Africa. They then met people who knew about compasses and charts as they did. Similarly in 1518, Pope Leo X was surprised to learn from a captured Moor that the merchants and scholars of the legendary city of Timbuktu made greater profit from the sale of books than from other items of trade. This Moor was not merely trying to entertain the pope with fabricated stories about Africa; the incredibility of the intellectual life of Timbuktu was well known to many Africans of the region.

Yet, most of the early travelers of Africa could not fully comprehend the extent of the great African civilization they observed, because most of them did not penetrate into the hinterland. Many confined their activities along the coast and did not take time to associate with Africans in order to learn more about the historical and cultural contexts of what they observed. With time, early travelers discovered that

reports on great African civilizations would not fascinate their European brethren and audience. So, they began to propagate falsehoods that satisfied the imagination of the European public, who fantasized about the remarkable racial and cultural difference of Africans and their alleged subhuman existence. The lurid details and misguided tales of Africans eating one another, living in trees, and having three eyes and a mouth on their foreheads aroused Europeans' curiosity about humans who were not lucky enough to have achieved the level of sophistication that existed in Europe. Indeed, much of the idea of Africa as a "dark" continent propagated until the 20th century was due to Europeans' lack of critical knowledge about the continent and a lot of misguided armchair comments.

One of the most significant achievements of African-centered scholarship that began to take firm root in the 1950s is a serious reconceptualization of what constitutes civilization in a cross-cultural and comparative sense. Pioneering Africanists have established that there is no universal criteria for measuring what constitutes civilization across societies and time. Each society developed cultural, social, and political institutions to serve its need. The peoples of these societies tamed the environment in order to maximize its numerous gains and delved into religion and spirituality in their endless quest to understand the complexity of the natural and supernatural world. African societies figured out ways to mobilize resources to address everyday challenges and responded to internal political changes as they emerged. What constitutes civilization must therefore be appreciated from local and indigenous perspectives, not from the viewpoint of the invaders of Africa.

If it is difficult to render a homogenous definition of civilization in global and periodic contexts, it is equally hard to say in absolute terms how big a society should be to qualify as an empire or a kingdom. Indeed, a simple contemporary English dictionary meaning of a kingdom as "a state or government having a king or queen as its head" and an empire as a "political unit having a territory of great extent or a number of territories or peoples under a single sovereign authority" cannot adequately explain the nature of political organization that existed in Africa before the European conquest of the 19th century. Information about the population and geographical stretch of precolonial African political entities is very sketchy. Thus, it would be difficult to use population and landmass to define kingdoms and empires within the African context. What is clear, however, is that many communities, such as the Igbo community in modern-day southeastern Nigeria, did not receive the appellation of a "kingdom" because it did not have a centralized political system ruled by a king. Yet, the Igbo community could have been as big or even bigger than societies ruled by kings and labeled "kingdoms." In another vein, communities defined as "empires" because they had many vassal states could be smaller than many societies designated as "kingdoms." However, a society does not have to be a kingdom or an empire to have civilization. While the nature of political organization is significant, the achievements of the society in art, music, architecture, law, philosophy, science and medicine, and education and intellectualism, among others elements of civilization, are the most vital.

The expansion and contraction of African societies due to state building, marriage and political agglomeration, and wars of expansion took place rapidly. A

kingdom in one decade or century could later become an empire and vice versa. Many empires started as small autonomous communities blessed with visionary leaders and enabling natural and human resources. A kingdom or an empire could collapse, but its civilization may not. Indeed, when empires fall, their remains are absorbed into existing communities, where they can remain relevant for decades or even centuries. In other instances, a collapsed empire can be re-created elsewhere. Its lost glories, artifacts, and social and political institutions can be reinvented or reinstated in another location. This is particularly the case of the Old Oyo Empire. After its demise in the third decade of the 19th century, this most prosperous Yoruba empire ever known was reinvented in the mid-19th century in a completely different location. From the early 20th century, the Oyo Empire assumed an important position in colonial politics when the British gave the king enormous power, far beyond the one the empire had in the mid-19th century.

Thus, one of the major challenges of writing about African civilization from the perspectives of empires, states, and kingdoms is the need to trace their transformation over time. As some of the entries in this encyclopedia establish, some empires assume the names of ethnic groups and vice versa. Hence, Ijebu is both a Yoruba subethnic group and a territory consisting of kingdoms and towns of varying sizes, histories, and influence. If it is difficult to say in absolute terms when many kingdoms rose to power, it can be challenging to put a definite date on when they collapsed. With the exception of the African kingdoms that were sacked by European conquest in the 19th and early 20th centuries, pinpointing the exact year that many African empires ceased to exist is not an easy task. The reason for this is not far-fetched. The absence of written accounts in most African cultures until the 20th century means that historians have to rely on oral traditions, which rarely tell the exact dates when events took place. Moreover, naming and renaming of political entities due to wars, political agglomeration or disintegration, and change in leadership, to mention but a few, constitutes a great challenge for effectively tracking the transformation of societies. Be that as it may, what seems important is not just the nature of political systems but also the level of social, economic, and political activities that defined the activities of each society.

One of the obvious imbalances in the study of African kingdoms is the limited attention given to the role of women. A cursory reading of the massive documentation on empire and state building will lead one to conclude that only men were responsible for creating polities and political institutions. However, scholars of African women and gender have successfully proved that women were actively involved in virtually all stages of empire building as warriors, peacemakers, and suppliers of essential wartime materials. Indeed, economic activities such as farming and trading, which supplied the resources for war prosecution, were conducted by women across generations. Iyalode Afunsetan Aniwura, the head of the women and female chiefs in Ibadan, as Bolanle Awe and LaRay Denzer have shown, did not appear at the war front, as did her male counterparts. However, she supplied soldiers, arms, and other war supplies that strengthened Ibadan, Yoruba's most militarized state in the 19th century. Dahomey even had a regiment of women soldiers whose exploits have been successfully documented by historians, including

Edna Bay. It is on record that Mai Idris Aloma, the most famous Sefuwa ruler in Borno, received his knowledge of politics from his mother, Magira Aisa Kili.

Women's role in empire building went beyond serving as political advisers or suppliers of the human and material resources for waging wars. In some parts of the continent they were the main political and military leaders of their communities, making laws, leading armies, and organizing polities. Oral tradition affirmed that the rulers of Daura before the ninth century were women, the *magajiyas* (queens). If records of the exploits of these early female Daura rulers are unclear due to the absence of reliable sources, that of Amina, who became the queen of Zazzau around 1576, is clear. Before ascending the throne, Amina had distinguished herself on the battlefield and in military matters. The kingmakers had no other choice but to crown her as queen because she was the most qualified person to lead her community, which was under constant military attacks—like other states and empires in the central Sudan region.

What is more, the intersections of women, household, and statecraft has occupied the attention of Africanists, including Emily Lynn Osborn. Anyone familiar with the literature on African political and women's history would readily agree with Osborn in her study of the Bate society (present-day Guinea-Conakry) between the 17th and early 20th centuries that previous studies have paid limited attention to the relationship between statecraft and the household. They tend to focus largely on the activities of male elites and the public institutions they created at the expense of discourse on how the domestic sphere was structured and recognized as a site of political power. According to Osborn, "when men make states—and men consistently dominate state-making during the period under study—they also make households" (Osborn 2011, 1). She engages the shifting manner in which the past of the Bate society is narrated and its implication on how power was maintained, distributed, and transmitted across time and space. Her interesting story of how a household-centered statecraft in precolonial Bate gave way to a public and male-dominated one under French colonialism is important not only for the history of politics and gender relations but also for coming to terms with the origin of one of the core issues in postcolonial discourse of underdevelopment—women's lack of political and economic agency.

Social, Political, and Religious Institutions and Thought in Africa

Physical historical artifacts such as city walls, temples, shrines, and pyramids are not the only obvious evidence of the greatness of African civilizations. Others include complex religious, cultural, political, and philosophical and social thoughts and institutions. Africans, like other humans, attempted to understand their physical, natural, and supernatural environment and their place in it. This quest paved the way for creating ideas, knowledge, and practices that formed the bedrock of social and political institutions. Laws and customs, among other elements of traditions, were all invented to suit a particular purpose or set of ideals at a point in time. They were also regularly revised to accommodate changes in the political and social orders. Hence, the idea that precolonial Africa was culturally static until

the colonial conquest of the 19th century is objectionable. Indeed, social change under colonial rule is part of a long history of transformation. Colonialism, as J. F. A. Ajayi has established, is an episode in African history of social change.

To start with, the diversity of the African myths of the origin of the universe challenge the homogenization of African experience—it compels us to rethink popular assumptions that African culture was/is the same across the continent. Yet, the common traits found in these myths validate the long history of cultural contact and sharing. Three main types of African creation myths are discernible. The first type, as seen among the Bushoong of Central Africa, credited the creation of the world to a primordial creator god. The myth contends that at the beginning of the world there were water, darkness, and Bumba, the creator god. One day Bumba experienced stomach pain, which caused him to vomit the sun. The intensity of the sun caused the water to dry out, leading to the creation of the land. Bumba later vomited the moon, the stars, and animals. Humans came last. The second category of myth posits that Earth was primordial and that the creator emerged from it. The Fulani of West Africa, for instance, believed that at first there was a drop of milk. Doondari, who made stone, then emerged from the milk. The stone then made iron, the iron created fire, fire made water, and water made air. Humans were created during Doondari's second trip to Earth. The third category of myths holds that both the gods and Earth were primordial. In the worldview of the Ijo of the Niger Delta of modern-day Nigeria, a field existed with a giant *iroko* tree. Suddenly a massive table descended, and on it were a big pile of dirt, a chair, and a large creation stone. Later a female deity, Woyengi, descended from heaven, rested her leg on the stone, and created humans from the dirt.

Regardless, African creation myths served multiple purposes across societies. Not only did the myths help in defining identity and forging sociocultural alliances across ethnicities, but they also served as the main fulcrum on which many religious ideologies rest. Religion reflected the complex relations that Africans established with nature and the physical environment. Natural features such as rivers, mountains and hills, and forests were the abode of the gods and goddesses, reminding people of the enormous power of nature. As sites/locations of historical events central to the life of the community, they connected people back to the realities of the past, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously. The gods and goddesses were mostly former humans who made significant contributions to their society and were later deified and worshipped by the family and the community at large. Regular sacrifice and ritualistic veneration of the gods and goddesses were significant historical reenactment that reminded people of the great men and women of the past. It was easy to invoke the achievement of the peoples of the past through rituals, because in most African societies physical death did not represent the end of life. When people die they simply transit to another world (the realm of the ancestors), where they moderate the affairs of the living. In other words, the human soul is indestructible. Sacrifices were important to ensure that the living continue to communicate with the ancestors, who still hold enormous power over the living. In most African religious cultures, the place of a supreme God was incontestable. The smaller gods, goddesses, ancestors, and deities served as a bridge

to the supreme God. If contemporary culture and politics undermine the role of women, ancient African societies upheld it. Indeed, female and male deities complemented the power of each other in the maintenance of harmony between the living and the ancestors.

Yet, as Ali Mazrui has rightly observed, Africa is a continent of the triple heritage of traditional religion and spirituality, Islam, and Christianity. While cultural and social institutions centered on indigenous religions, they were complemented over time with Islamic thought, especially in the northern, western, and eastern parts of the continent. From the 12th century or earlier, Islam entered the main political structure of many African kingdoms and societies. Historians generally agree that Islam paved the way for the documentation of the history of many parts of the continent. In fact, the earliest written accounts of the history of modern-day Mali and northern Nigeria from the 14th century were written in Arabic. The linguistic culture of communities expanded as Arabic words, sayings, and proverbs entered and found a comfortable place in indigenous language and thought. Indeed, jihad (holy war), which led to the rise and demise of kingdoms, empires, and states, was inspired by Islamic revivalism. For example, the Sokoto Caliphate, the largest Islamic state in early 20th-century Africa, did not exist before the 19th century. Its rise and fall within a century testifies to the massive impact of Islam in Africa. Because politics had a strong influence on broader social processes, the Islamic jihad, which led to the creation and destruction of many political entities in 19th-century West Africa, also ushered in significant social change. Marriage, music, thought, and art all underwent massive transformations, drawing from local values and the imported Islamic culture. Thus, what constitutes "African" culture and civilization needs to be thoroughly contextualized and conceptualized within the framework of the interaction (and sometimes conflict) between indigenous and foreign cultural implantation.

What is true about Islam is equally correct about Christianity. Although Christianity did not begin to have a strong physical presence in Africa until the first half of the 19th century, its spread from that period would be speedy and steady. The divergence of the doctrine of the Christian missions that came to Africa in the 19th century meant that Africa would accommodate a multiplicity of Christian virtues. Thus, it is easy to differentiate between the Catholic Africa and the Methodist Africa. The European Christian missions were the first to introduce Western education to most parts of Africa from the 19th century as they struggled among one another for the African soul. The intersection of Western education and Christianity went beyond salvation and spirituality—it was also about cultural change. Significant social change was reflected in the rise of new educated elites (especially in West Africa), the majority of whom were also liberated slaves and their descendants. They introduced the first wave of modern entrepreneurship and intellectualism. They were also the first to revolt against the racial practices of the European churches by establishing African churches from the second half of the 19th century. The Africanization of Christianity was a direct testimony to the creativity of Africans in making a local expression of a foreign religion. Without this first generation of modern African intellectuals, nationalism and decolonization in 20th-century Anglophone West Africa would have taken a completely different turn.

Some, especially the Brazilian returnees, introduced Brazilian architecture and entrepreneurship in places such as Lagos and Ghana. The introduction of Brazilian architecture to West Africa validates how culture and place-belonging can shape artistry and architectural ingenuity. But more important, it demonstrates that African civilization was built not only by continental Africans but also by returnees from the diaspora who resettled among their long-lost brethren.

The discussion of the role of indigenous religion and Islam and Christianity in precolonial Africa leads to that of local conception of history and its transmission and documentation. A portion of the oral poem of Basorun Ogunmola, a distinguished warrior of 1860s Ibadan, reads:

Akokoluko ebo ti pa'gun le' rin
 Opolopo ojo ti le'gun wo'le, keri, keri, keri
 Okele akobu ti'ro gan gan di
 Ina'ju ekun ti de'ru b'ode

[a massive sacrifice that amazes the vulture
 the torrential rain that stops a masquerade from performing in public
 the first morsel/bite of a solid food that worries the anus
 the sight of a tiger that frightens the hunter]

This praise poem is a testimony to the creativity of the Yoruba in tapping into the natural, supernatural, physical, and even animal worlds in rendering an interesting profile of a distinguished personality. Significantly, it is about how a society generates knowledge and transmits it from one generation to another. Until the 20th century, when the imposition of colonial rule intensified the documentation of African history in written form, the pasts of most societies were stored in oral traditions. History was also a daily performance in that songs, sayings, proverbs, and statements connected people back to the realities of the past directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously. History manifested in the daily passage of time, in religious observances, and in social, political, and economic relations. Societies created historical narratives from observing everyday actions of communities, peoples, events, and circumstances. Some communities had special chieftaincy titles and persons (such as the griots of modern-day Mali) saddled with the responsibility of orally documenting and educating the community about history and indigenous practices. Moonlight stories told by elderly people to children were occasionally tied to the rite of passage and initiation into age grades and the transition from childhood to adulthood. Significant judicial decisions and collective responses to core challenges of state building served as markers of or reference points to a much bigger historical narrative. Oral traditions ensured that future generations had access to the achievements and follies of their ancestors. It is also dynamic because the indigenous mode of generating knowledge was rarely monopolized by any group of people or chieftaincy institution. The constant conflict over historical truth can partly be attributed to the diverse interpretation accorded to popular events of the past or the need to challenge the dominant version of a story promoted by powerful people.

Be that as it may, the dynamism of oral traditions, a significant element of African civilization, points to the value of history in precolonial African societies. Indeed, history was vital in every aspect of African life. It shaped decision making, guided actions, and molded attitudes and interpersonal and communal relations. History manifested in the daily veneration of the ancestors, in economic transaction, in marriage and career choices, and in life trajectories in general. The complexity of African oral traditions has led to a number of misconceptions about Africa. Indeed, until the 1950s Western academic culture did not believe that oral tradition is history. Academics, colonial administrators, and commentators thought that Africans who did not document their past in written form did not have history. They equated history with documented facts. This Euro-centric conception of the past equally shaped racial attitudes toward Africans. In fact, the European conquest of Africa was informed in part by the notion that Africa required colonialism because it lacked history. This attitude toward oral tradition clearly reveals that what constitutes an authentic past and the manner of transmission varies from one society to another. By the 1950s and 1960s, pioneering Africanist historians were able to successfully convince their counterparts working in Western historical tradition that oral tradition is history and that a large body of oral traditions could be collected, analyzed, and carefully synthesized to reconstruct the history of a society. Oral tradition has its own limitations (such as lack of dates and deliberate and nondeliberate distortion), which scholars and practitioners must contend with. However, these limitations do not override their importance as a useful source of history. One of the main arguments in favor of oral tradition is that the fact that a history is written does not mean it is authentic. All sources of history thus have their own shortcomings.

The mechanism for creating and transmitting oral tradition was definitely a component of indigenous African education, which focused on the training of the mind, body, hands, brain, and soul for the benefit of the family and the community at large. Thus, indigenous education was a total training that prepared an individual to assume social, economic, political, and military responsibilities in the community. Occupational training was central to indigenous education. Right from childhood, boys and girls learned the trade and craft of their parents and families to produce the economic and social capital for the larger community. The Asante would attach a small boy to an elder farmer and be given a small area of land to cultivate to ensure active participation. As he grew up, the boy was given a gun and gradually prepared to help defend the community. Girls would help their mothers with farmwork, food processing, domestic chores, and everyday running of the household. They would also learn simple arithmetic, as this helped them with trading and commercial transactions. The age grade system found in many parts of Africa was not just about rites of passage and festivals. It was a system carefully designed to educate children in the conundrum of the society. Children and youths learned from difference educators, which included parents and community leaders. Group learning fostered interpersonal communications, teamwork, the exchange of ideas, and self-expression, all of which helped communal harmony.

The introduction of Islam and Christianity expanded African education without killing preexisting educational norms. In addition to learning from home, children

received additional training in European languages and Arabic. Indigenous education and Islamic and European education had a lot in common. For instance, they all involved memorization of information and facts. However, the distinct advantage of European and Islamic education was documentation. Some African Muslims and Christians began to document the history of their communities in Arabic and European languages centuries or decades before the imposition of colonial rule. Nana Asma'u, a princess, poet, and teacher and the daughter of Usman dan Fodio, the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate, is a good example of how Africans seized the opportunity of the introduction of Islam to expand the literary experience of their people. Over three dozens of Asma'u's surviving literary works, written in the 19th century, give an unusual insight into the history, politics, and culture of West Africa. Samuel Johnson of the Yoruba used his knowledge of English, which he acquired in Christian mission schools, to write the first detailed history of the Yoruba in the late 19th century. His book *The History of the Yorubas* has remained a classic and indispensable work for scholars across generations. In each case, we see how Africans combined their mastery of indigenous knowledge with European and Arabic literacy to produce works that affirm the brilliance of indigenous African thought.

The discussion of African education leads us to another form of knowledge system: divination. The central purpose of divination was to gain access to information or ideas not available through ordinary empirical means. Divination systems are poetic and philosophical statements and historical records on the societies that generated and used them for diverse purposes. The divination system was also used to diagnose diseases and misfortune, forecast the future, and provide the guidelines for peaceful inter- and intracommunal relations. Indeed, some divination system, especially that of the Yoruba (called Ifá), have been recognized as a treasure trove by UNESCO and studied in universities across the world. The sources of the information contained in divination systems were usually ancestors or god figures, relayed through a human medium. The methods of relaying information varied widely. Zulu mediums interpreted messages in dreams, while others, especially the Banem, Mambila, and Dogon, all used animal oracles. While the Banem and Mambila used spiders and land crabs, the Dogon used a fox, the animal that featured prominently in the people's creation story. The divination systems of many Islamic societies, including the Yoruba, made use of inanimate tools, such as the cowrie shell system and a random binary system using a tray covered with dust or sand. The Yoruba also used kola nuts.

Regardless of the methods of unlocking the unseen in the natural and supernatural worlds, acquiring the knowledge of divination required years of apprenticeship under superior diviners, who also served as cultural brokers in many societies. Like most professions in precolonial Africa, divination practice was usually monopolized by a family or community, who ensured that the art was transmitted from one generation to another. The regular sacrifices and rites of passage ceremonies conducted during divination training and after were all meant to initiate new practitioners into the mediumship realm, required for discerning and interpreting messages from the source of divination—the gods, goddesses, and ancestors.

Politics was central to African civilization. It ensured the distribution of social, economic, and political resources and goods across the community. Politics operated at diverse levels of African societies—home, community, town, and empire. But the most popular form of politics was the public type, which operated at the level of the community and the town or empire. The central purpose of public politics was peace and order, required for the society to grow. Indeed, all the evidence of African civilization—from the great pyramids of Egypt to the massive philosophies embedded in the divination system—flourished in the atmosphere of peace. It was also through politics that the society mobilized resources for collective growth, military recruitment and defense, and the administration of justice. One feature of politics in big empires is the delegation of power. The king or emperor allowed junior chiefs to coordinate politics in smaller towns and vassal states in order to ensure effective governance and retain loyalty. Each component/section of the society (military, religion, women, trade, public works, youths) had chiefs who oversaw them. Communities that did not have kings or centralized political cultures devised mechanisms to run their societies, using popular consensus among other methods, to make vital decisions.

The origins of political ideas and laws used for governing each society varied across time. But the similarities in the ways societies were governed is a clear indication that people shared ideas and borrowed practices, domesticating them to fit their needs. Many laws were definitely made by influential people, including kings and queens. The inevitable powers of the ancestors in African life made them a clear source of laws. Through their spirit medium, they could invoke orders and make laws, which everyone was expected to follow. In some cases, cultural practices were transformed into laws and used to mediate relations. African societies did learn from the mistakes of the past. In order to avoid repeating mistakes, laws could be made and enforced by the political and religious elites.

It is difficult to differentiate between law and custom, for they were closely intertwined. A contravention of customary practices invariably meant the breaking of laws. For instance, killing animals in the sacred forest or grove in most African societies was a taboo. Punishment for offenses depended on the severity and the individuals involved. Adultery was usually punished by banishment or presentation of sacrifice to the gods and goddesses, while capital punishment was inflicted for homicide and blasphemy. The introduction of Islam to Africa expanded the continent's legal system. In many parts of the continent, Islamic law coexisted with indigenous law, creating a lot of crisis of accommodation. In fact, many of the holy wars (jihad) were caused by the quest to entrench sharia, the Islamic legal system.

In sum, *African Kingdoms: An Encyclopedia of Empires and Civilizations* attempts to recover the glorious African past. The entries introduce readers to major empires and kingdoms, their political organization, and their achievement in arts, architecture, intellectualism, religion and spirituality, and science, to mention but a few.

Further Reading

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