Chapter 25

Africa and the Atlantic World

THE CHAPTER IN PERSPECTIVE

Sub-Saharan Africa, was influenced, like most of the rest of the world, by the establishment of global trading networks during the early modern age. European merchants, lured by the possibility for trading opportunities, increasingly visited the west African coasts. The rise of wealthy port cities and powerful coastal kingdoms reduced, but did not eliminate, the traditional trans-Saharan trade routes. Slavery, both African and Islamic, had been a part of African life for centuries and even thousands of years. The burgeoning Atlantic slave trade would dwarf its predecessors and constitute the largest migration in history before the nineteenth century. Not only were millions of Africans captured and sold into slavery, but their home societies were often left in chaos. The integration of African and American society would lay the foundations for the complex African diaspora of the western hemisphere.

OVERVIEW

African Politics and Society in Early Modern Times

Increased trade would eventually bring about a transformation of African political patterns. The Songhay empire, carrying on in the imperial tradition of Mali, would reach its peak during the fifteenth century under the leadership of Sunni Ali. Songhay rulers, like their Mali predecessors, were Islamic. Under their patronage Timbuktu became a major center of Islamic learning. Changing economic times, especially the rising prominence of Atlantic trade, pushed for the rise of small regional states and away from the larger imperial states of the past. On the other side of Africa the Swahili city-states fell to the gunboat diplomacy of the Portuguese. Central Africa witnessed the rise of regional kingdoms that were also unable to escape Portuguese interference. The king of Kongo, Afonso I, converted to Christianity and encouraged his subjects to do the same. This close tie to Portugal, however, would not allow Kongo to escape Portuguese slave raiders or invasion. Further to the south the remarkable Queen Nzinga fought a forty year battle in the seventeenth century to keep the Portuguese from conquering Ndongo. Unfortunately, her successors would not prove as successful, and Angola would become the first European colony in sub-Saharan Africa. In the far south the Dutch established Cape Town in 1652 and began to dominate the Khoikhoi people.

As is usually the case, religious and social pressures went hand in hand with the political changes brought by the invading Europeans. In this case the animistic African beliefs were challenged by Islam and later Christianity. Not surprisingly, both religions became popular in syncretic versions as the older beliefs were infused into the new concepts. The Fulani, representative of many who were concerned about the purity of Islam in the face of the syncretic varieties, mounted military campaigns to establish a strict form of Islam. An interesting syncretic version of Christianity appeared in Kongo in the early 1700s. Dona Beatriz proposed that Jesus Christ was a black African man and that Kongo was the real holy land. In the end she was burned at the stake by the Christian Kongo king. Trade brought new food crops to Africa, the most important being the American manioc. The increased food supply led to steady population growth even considering the millions forced out of Africa because of slavery. In the three centuries after 1500 the population of sub-Saharan Africa rose from 34 to 60 million.

The Atlantic Slave Trade

Slavery, unfortunately, has played a consistent role in the human experience for thousands of years, and the African societies have suffered disproportionately. Two factors, law and society, have
combined to make African slavery unique. Since private property was not recognized in Africa, the ownership of slaves rather than land stood as a measure of personal wealth. Slaves could also be brought into the kinship group and receive freedom and recognition in the clan within a generation. During the centuries before the arrival of the Europeans, around ten million Africans passed into the Islamic world as part of the trans-Saharan slave trade. The Europeans, led originally by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, tied into existing slave networks and dramatically exacerbated the problem. Slaves played a central role in the triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Firearms were the most popular item that the Europeans exchanged for slaves. The middle passage is, of course, an event of legendary inhumanity that cost the lives of around a quarter of all African slaves shipped across the Atlantic. Over 55,000 slaves a year were exported to the Americas during the eighteenth century, the high point of the slave trade. It has been estimated that twelve million Africans arrived in the western hemisphere died another four million during the middle passage. While some African societies, such as the Asante, Dahomey, and Oyo, may have benefited financially from the slave trade, most regions suffered horrifically. Many areas were left with a disproportionately high percentage of women because the young men had been sold into slavery. Other areas were torn by warfare caused by the tensions from the slave trade.

The African Diaspora

As slaves were exported throughout the Americas, the foundation was laid for the establishment of the African diaspora. In the Americas most slaves served on large plantations that produced cash crops such as sugar, tobacco, rice, indigo, or cotton. The nature of the slave communities varied dramatically from one region to another. An astonishingly high mortality rate on Caribbean and South American plantations resulted in a constant turnover in slaves and very little family structure. The five percent of slaves who were exported to North America had a greater chance to form families but still led a harsh and Spartan existence. Slave resistance was common, although a large organized slave revolt remained a rare but greatly feared event. Saint-Domingue was the only place where a slave revolt actually led to the abolition of slavery. Attempts by slaves to preserve languages or cultural traditions from their homelands became more and more difficult. The result would be the integration of concepts as the creation of a true African-American cultural tradition. This integration can be seen clearly in the rise of syncretic religions such as voodoo in Haiti. Pressures for the abolition of the slave trade would come through the words and writings of ex-slaves such as Olaudah Equiano as well as the economic reality of the decreasing benefits of slavery. The United States and most European nations abolished the slave trade in the first half of the nineteenth century. The abolition of slavery itself would follow within a few decades, although it tenaciously hung on in some parts of the world well into the twentieth century. Even today it has been estimated that around two hundred million people still live in some form of servitude.