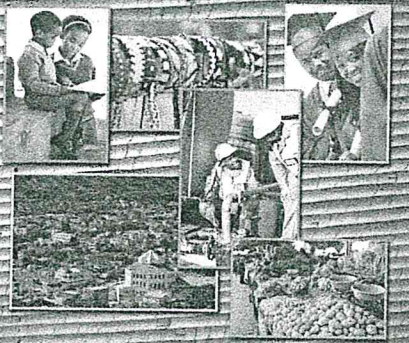


CHAPTER 2



The Rise and Fall of States and Empires in Precolonial Africa

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INTRODUCTION

States, kingdoms, and empires in Africa date back to antiquity. As Molefi Asante, a historian, has noted, "No continent has ever had as many viable kingdoms and empires for as long a time as the continent of Africa."¹ This chapter is not so much concerned with the specific civilizations, kingdoms, and states that developed in Africa as with the elements that made it possible for them to rise and fall at different times. Among the factors that contributed to the emergence of precolonial states, empires, and kingdoms in Africa are agriculture, religion, trade, leadership, environment, technology, and invader groups. The following factors, among others, account for their collapse: environmental degradation, warfare, political disputes, economic decline, slave trade, and foreign interventions. Using a geographical and regional approach (North Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, South Africa, and West Africa), we shall consider the circumstances that influenced state formation and their collapse in Africa.

THE RISE AND FALL OF STATES AND EMPIRES IN NORTH AFRICA

The Nile River, the longest river in the world, is responsible for the rise of states and empires in North Africa. The Nile consists of two main rivers: the White Nile, which flows from the highlands of Uganda, and the Blue Nile, which flows from the Ethiopian highlands. Together, they merge with the Atbara River in Sudan to join the Indian Ocean on the East African coast. From June to September, high rainfall in the Ethiopian highlands causes the Blue Nile to flood its banks, carrying with it rich silts that it deposits at the banks of the river. This natural phenomenon provides 18,250 kilometers of arable land along the banks of the Nile from Aswan to the Delta.²

The Nile attracted people fleeing from the desiccation of the Sahara to settle along its banks. This led to important developments in food production and trade, giving rise to a population explosion and consequently the rise of states and empires such as ancient Egypt, Nubian kingdoms of Kush, Meroe, and Napata (all in modern Sudan) in North Africa. The navigable nature of the river enabled shipbuilding, which facilitated trade. The Nile valley abounded in limestone, sandstone, and granite, which were utilized in the stone architecture, monuments, and pyramids of ancient Egypt. The importance of the Nile in the thriving of North African states cannot be overemphasized.

Agriculture contributed to the emergence of states and empires in North Africa.³ The annual Nile flood fertilized the cultivable land, thus making available land for farming and rich pasture for animals. Agriculture was the basis of the Egyptian civilization. The Egyptians planted cereals like millet, sorghum, and barley; and reared sheep, goats, and cattle. The Egyptians invented complex irrigation systems such as the shaduf, "a pole



Map showing North African precolonial states. Courtesy of University of Texas at Austin Library, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/shepherd_1911/shepherd-c-004.jpg

on a fulcrum with counter-weight on one end and a water-bucket on the other, to raise water into the fields” and the *sagia* (an ox-drawn watershed) to produce food throughout the year.⁴ The introduction of iron implements from Meroe (Northern Sudan) helped to revolutionize agriculture in Egypt. A food supply of different diets was guaranteed, leading to a population explosion. The availability of food had the effect of granting spare time to build permanent settlements, develop skills such as writing, metalworking (bronze, copper, and gold), fine arts, religious practices, and science (mathematics and astrology). It also encouraged the emergence of an aristocratic class that controlled surpluses and trade, and who became those upon whom people depended for favors. Egyptian society became stratified. Food sufficiency guaranteed labor for military service and building projects such as the pyramids, canals, and roads. Accordingly, villages expanded into towns and states, which in turn expanded into kingdoms and empires.

Trade was a very important factor in the development of states and empires in North Africa. North African states engaged in regional and international trade with the Mediterranean World, the Near East and Asia. The initial trading activities started with the exchange of surplus food and other products for goods that people lacked. Over time, this trade expanded to other areas, utilizing the Nile and land routes into the African hinterland. Rulers who could control trade routes and the flow of goods grew powerful and influential. They imposed taxes and tributes on merchants, thus accruing wealth to expand their states. The kingdoms of Kush, founded by the Nubians in the eleventh century, emerged because of the ability of their rulers to control the trade that passed through their territory to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean seaports. Kush grew so powerful that it was able

to conquer and rule Egypt in 730 BCE and created the 25th (or Ethiopian) dynasty, which lasted for sixty years.⁵ Ancient Egypt had the advantage of controlling the gold mines in the eastern desert, the ebony and ivory trade in Nubia, and the copper mines in the Sinai region, in addition to trading with Punt (Somalia) and Arabia for spices, incense, and perfumes. Morocco traded with the Sudanese empires and East African states using the city of Sijilmasa as its main entrepot for gold and salt from Taghaza.⁶ Trade brought tax revenue, new technology, and access to luxury goods. This made rulers of states wealthy, and with wealth came the expansion of states into empires.

Effective and dynamic leadership is a necessity for a viable state. The abundance of food and the development of trade required leaders to control surpluses and ensure the safety of trade routes, goods, and merchants, in addition to keeping the various classes of society in order. In ancient Egypt, Narmer (Menes) unified the forty-two city-states of Upper and Lower Egypt into one formidable kingdom in 3100 BCE by creating the position of the Pharaoh through the invocation of religion. To prevent the authority of the Pharaoh from being usurped by other enthusiasts, Narmer established a royal family and succession by primogeniture (a system whereby the eldest child, especially the male child, inherits the throne from his father). In the Kushite kingdom, Kashta and Piankhy are the two able kings attributed with the successful conquest of Egypt, thus enabling Kush to be independent and even rule over Egypt, for a time.⁷ In general, leaders gained the trust of their followers and were able to lead their armies to war, broker peace, and to expand their territory.

Religion was another component that greatly influenced the rise and sustainability of precolonial states in North Africa. African indigenous religion and Islam influenced the rise of leaders and, subsequently, the rise of states and empires. In African indigenous religion, the leader occupied the crucial position as the nexus between the people, the gods, and their ancestors in addition to having the power to interpret natural occurrences such as death, disease, famine, harvest, and rainfall. Due to this religious quality, his or her political authority is hardly challenged. For instance, the ancient Egyptians worshipped a pantheon of gods. Narmer introduced an innovation in the belief system of Lower and Upper Egypt by marrying these gods and producing a monotheist religion. Of the multiplicity of gods, the outstanding one was Osiris—son of the god Re or Amon Re—who was murdered by his brother Seth. The inability of Osiris's wife, Isis, to resurrect her husband left him as god of the underworld.⁸ Narmer legitimized his rule by claiming family ties to these gods, thereby invoking divine approval for his leadership.

Islam also helped tremendously in the founding and prospering of states and empires. Through religious persecutions, missionary work, and trade, Islam crossed the Arabian Peninsula to the African continent beginning in the seventh century. Islamic traditions and schools flourished due to this contact, constituting the driving force behind the revivals that occurred thereafter. In North Africa, some of the Sanhaja Berbers converted to Islam. In the eleventh century, Abdullah ibn Yasin, a Muslim theologian, founded the al-Murabitun Movement (the name of which was corrupted by the Spanish to Almoravid). Ibn Yasin's movement attracted many followers who shared his ardor to spread Islam. With the alliance of the Lamtuna Berbers who wanted political dominance and economic control in the Sudan, he waged several jihads resulting in the creation of the Moroccan empire.⁹ Ibn Yasin's jihad spread Islam as far as the Sudan, and with it, trade. In the twelfth century, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Tumart founded the al-Muwahhidun (Almohad) movement to reform Islam. The Almohad conquered the Moroccan capital of Marrakesh and established their empire. Religion held the state together and facilitated trade through which ideas were disseminated. Arabic became the principal language of trade in addition to religion. Merchants from the Middle East and Far East felt confident and safe as they shared the same religion with the North African traders.

Immigration to North Africa also engendered the rise of states. By the beginning of the ninth century, Islam and trade had brought merchants, artisans, and religious scholars from Asia, Arabia, and Europe to settle in North Africa. In addition, political and religious persecutions carried out by Spain in the fifteenth century forced several groups, mostly scholars and farmers, to emigrate into Tunisia and Morocco. These groups of people joined and mixed with the Moroccan empire. Desertification of the Sahara also forced settlers from the Sudan and Chad into the area of "Aswan to the Batn al-hajar (Belly of Stones)."¹⁰ These migrants intermarried with the indigenous people to create the foundations of the Nubian kingdom (Sudan). The importance of these migrant groups in the founding of states and empires was that they served as vehicles through which ideas of iron technology, literature, religion, and luxury goods flowed into North Africa.

The states and empires in North Africa, however, declined over time. One of the major causes of the decline of states, empires, and kingdoms in North Africa was political instability. This was caused by overexpansion, succession disputes, invasion, political rivalry, and corruption. Ancient Egypt suffered succession disputes when the position of the Pharaohs weakened, making it possible for outside forces to invade.¹¹ Vassal states such as Kush were able to wrest their independence from and even conquer their former master.¹² The Moroccan empire of the Almoravids expanded beyond their means to govern. Their wars of expansion into Europe (Spain) in the twelfth century cost many lives and strained the resources of the state.¹³ Additionally, since the foundation of the empire was based on religious revivalism, the theologians and Imams in charge of administration were unable to keep the diverse fabric of the empire intact.¹⁴ This paved the way for local chiefs to grow powerful and oppress their subjects by overtaxing them. The imposition of “non-Quranic taxes” on Andalusia created discontent among the Muslim populace.¹⁵ The Almohad Empire began to weaken when succession disputes between the two brothers, Umar and Abu Ya’qub Yusuf occurred in 1143.¹⁶ From the seventeenth century onward, political rivalry between local lords and religious elites for power escalated into incessant wars, thus weakening the states.¹⁷

Invasions and wars also led to the demise of North African states and empires. Ancient Egypt became an easy target when the government and internal security weakened. Egypt underwent a series of conquests that shrunk its power base: Kush in 715 BCE, Assyria in 691 BCE, Persia in 526 BCE, Greece in 333 BCE, Rome from 168 BCE to 31 BCE, Arabs in 639 CE, Philistine in 1227 BCE, and the Mamluk Turks in 1250 BCE. Invasion from a revived Egypt in 1502 ended the Nubian state. Kush collapsed in the fourth century CE from attacks by nomadic groups from Axum.¹⁸ These wars and invasions disrupted society, weakened governments, destroyed trade, and cost lives.

Another important element that conditioned the collapse of states and empires was environmental degradation. In order to sustain the economic activity of metal production in the Nubian kingdom of Meroe, for instance, hardwood trees were cut to use as fuel to smelt iron, copper, and bronze.¹⁹ The constant felling of trees over the years without replacing them led to deforestation and subsequently a change in the rainfall pattern. Droughts caused by environmental and climatic change adversely affected the economy of North Africa. The Nile, the lifeline of Egypt especially, and North Africa generally, reduced in size. This affected agriculture and the livelihood of the people, hence the weakening of states.

The decline of economic activities also spelled the doom of North African states. The Almohad empire depended on trade with Europe and the Sahara; when peace in the Sahara was disturbed through warfare, trade was disrupted. The new sea route, which diverted trade from Asia to Europe through the Atlantic Ocean, reduced the volume of trade in North Africa. This reduced the revenues that flowed into the coffers of North African states and empires, contributing to their demise.

The advent of colonialism from the nineteenth century ended the age of North African empires. European imperialists struggled with African states for political and economic control. With the use of advanced weapons, African collaborators, and treachery, European powers, especially France and Britain, succeeded in dividing North African states among themselves.

THE RISE AND FALL OF EAST AND CENTRAL AFRICAN STATES AND EMPIRES

Agriculture laid the foundation for many states, kingdoms, and empires in East and Central Africa. In the first century BCE, plantain and banana were introduced from Southeast Asia through trade with Indonesia, Malaysia, and India to Bantu settlers in east Africa, who in turn spread these as they migrated inland.²⁰ In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese also brought new crops such as maize and cassava to central Africa. These crops adapted to the soil and did not need intensive labor to cultivate them. The Bantu introduced iron tools to the region and helped to transform agricultural practices. Aksum grew coffee, finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*), ensete (*Ensete edulis*), noog oil plant, wheat, barley, sorghum, and teff (*Eragrostis tef*), which became a staple crop of east Africa. Coastal peoples fished for shellfish to be used as beads, food, perfume, and shells; sharks, and barracudas.²¹ The success of farming and fishing practices led to abundance of food and the development of trade. Between 1100 and 1350, pastoralism increased, especially after the introduction of the Zebu cattle (*Bos indicus*), a drought-resistant species from India.²²

Crop production and the domestication of animals such as cattle, sheep, and goats guaranteed an abundance of food which led to population explosion. This resulted in increased competition for land for agriculture and pasture for grazing. The Ila and Tonga in Zambia, for instance, increasingly sought new land to farm.²³ The availability of food also spared people in the villages time to specialize in crafts, arts, and military services. Cattle created wealth, political hegemony, and enabled leaders to control trade routes for iron tools, salt, dried fish, and bark cloth. Areas like Sofala, the Rufiji Delta, Pemba Island, Mombasa, Malindi, Tana Delta, Lamu Archipelago, and Juba in East Africa all started as agricultural communities producing crops, rearing animals, and fishing. As merchant ships sailed to these coastal towns to acquire food supplies, fresh water, and to sell their merchandise, these otherwise small farming communities expanded into states and grew wealthy. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, abundance of food had allowed kingdoms like Bunyoro (Uganda), Buganda (Uganda), Rwanda, Burundi, Kongo, Luba, and Lunda (Congo) to grow.

The influx of foreigners into east and central Africa enabled also the development of states and empires. Through a change in demography and the infusion of new ideas about kingship, governance, technology in agriculture (irrigation and terracing), architecture, mineral extraction, weaponry, warfare, and the art of writing, existing indigenous states and practices gave way to formidable states and empires such as the Luba, Lunda, and Kongo. The Luo-Bito invaders from east Africa conquered the Chwezi rulers of the Kitara states and established their rule. The Luo legitimized their rule by adopting some of the Chwezi royal paraphernalia such as royal drums, and copper objects such as official spears and the cone-shaped beaded crown.²⁴ Migrants from Saba in Arabia in the northeast coast of Africa, between the eighth and third centuries BCE mingled with the indigenes to found Aksum.²⁵ The Luba invaded the petty villages in the Congo grassland and unified them to found the states of Katanga and Kongo in modern Congo. The Lunda invaders founded the Akimbo kingdom around 1700. Bantu migrants flowed into east, central, and southern Africa, spreading root crops like banana and iron and changing the face of agriculture in these areas. These groups intermingled to found states and empires.²⁶

Interregional and international trade via the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and Atlantic Ocean played a key role in the rise of states and empires in east and central Africa. From October to April, "lanteen-rigged" dhows and merchant ships used the northeast monsoon winds to sail from the Red Sea, Asia, and the Persian Gulf to the Swahili coast and returned upon the April–October southwest monsoon winds with African goods. Imported goods to the Swahili coast included glass beads, Chinese porcelain, Cambodian jars, and spindle whorls. The East African coastal states traded with India, Yemen, China, Persia, and the rest of Africa, exporting slaves, gold, ivory, ebony, ambergris, sandalwood, and tortoise shells.

East African coastal towns and agricultural villages such as Sofala, Kilwa, Ungwana, Manda, Lamu, Mombasa, Mafia, Kisiwani, and Zanzibar, which had navigable rivers and shorelines with natural harbors, became distribution centers that consequently helped in their expansion into independent states with centralized government. This necessitated strong, permanent, and spacious buildings for accommodation and storage of goods. As the East African coastal towns grew bigger, they attracted people from the African interior, Arabia, and Asia. Gradually, cultures and people mixed to create the Swahili culture. Kilwa was the most prosperous of the Swahili states because it had its own coin mintage. It had customs officials who regulated trade by imposing import and export taxes on all goods that entered or left its territory. For instance, a tax of one elephant tusk was levied on every seven tusks bought. The funds generated went into the maintenance of the royal court and the state military.

Trade in the forest was carried on paths and rivers such as Congo, Kesai, Kavango, Senkuru, Zambezi, and lakes Malawi, Kisale, Bangweului, Mweni, making it easy for goods, people, and ideas to be exchanged between central Africa and other parts of the continent. Control of the trade routes meant the right to tax, exact tribute, and control the price of goods such as guns, ammunition, and cotton cloths imported through the Indian Ocean trade. King Mutesa of Kongo controlled Lake Victoria with his navies composed of canoes and raided the neighbors for ivory and cattle. The Bemba sold salt, ivory, slaves, and fish to Swahili Arabs, thereby growing powerful enough to unify numerous villages in the eighteenth century.²⁷ Through the regulation of trade and wars of conquest, the Bemba expanded their territory. The Kongo expanded when central Africa was drawn into the Atlantic trade in the fifteenth century. Using ports such as Duala and Benguela, they sold slaves, copper, and ivory to the Portuguese. Iron and copper products such as farm tools, weapons, and jewelry from Malawi, Sanga, and Kongo were exchanged for slaves and ivory. Iron encouraged the establishment of