Africa in the Early Colonial Period

We cannot reckon how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives, because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab them wishing to have the things and wares of this Kingdom.

—King Afonso, in a letter to the King of Portugal (1526)

In the quote above, King Afonso of the Kongo Kingdom was writing about the terrible devastation that the transatlantic slave trade wrought on his kingdom. The Atlantic slave trade was a pivotal development in the history of the African continent during the Early Modern Era. It contributed to the decline of many West African societies, but it also had ripple effects across the entire African continent; the changes it brought would make African societies of the year 1450 almost unrecognizable by 1750.

African Civilizations at the Beginning of the Era

As discussed in Chapter 9, the era from 600 to 1450 brought considerable change to Africa. South of the Sahara, the introduction of bananas from Southeast Asia spurred great population growth. In North Africa and in the trading cities along the east coast, Islam spread rapidly as a result of the phenomenal growth of the Abbasid Empire, centered in Baghdad, and the activities of Muslim merchants. Interactions among various cultures inside and outside of Africa brought extensive trade and new technology to the continent. (Test Prep: Create a timeline of the main changes in Africa during the years 600 to 1450. See pages 161–172.)

Songhay Empire The Songhay people were the main ethnic group in and around the city of Gao on the Niger River. Gao prospered through the trans-Saharan trade but was eventually conquered by the Mali Empire. However, unrest among Malian factions weakened the empire in the early fifteenth century. This allowed Gao to regain its independence. In 1464, Sunni Ali became ruler of the Songhay people and began to aggressively conquer territory on both sides of the Niger River, creating the Songhay Empire.

Among Ali’s conquests was Timbuktu, famous as a center of Islamic scholarship. Although a Muslim himself, Ali was not intensely devout. He
instituted repressive policies against some of the scholars there, particularly those associated with peoples he had overthrown in his empire-building campaign. By the 1480s, he had built an empire that surpassed that of the Mali Empire before him. The cause of Sunni Ali’s death in 1492 is uncertain. According to some, he drowned while crossing the Niger River; others contend that he was killed by a nephew, his sister’s son, in a bid for power.

Sunni Ali’s nephew eventually took power. He was Askia Muhammad, also known as Askia the Great. He continued to expand and strengthen the empire, making it about as large as the state of Alaska. While Islam had been practiced widely in West Africa for generations, Askia strengthened the religion in the region by building schools and mosques. As Mansa Musa had done two centuries earlier, he traveled to Mecca with impressive quantities of gold. Like Islamic rulers in Spain, Askia Muhammad practiced toleration of other faiths.

The Songhay Empire did not last long, only about 100 years. Like many other empires in the world in this era, it fell to forces wielding a new weapon: firearms. In Songhay’s case, the conquering forces were Moroccans from northwest Africa.

**Europeans Arrive** Certain regions of East and West Africa were the targets of European conquest during the late fifteenth century. Portuguese ruler Prince Henry the Navigator was keenly interested in navigational technology. He financed expeditions along Africa’s Atlantic Coast and around the Cape
of Good Hope, exploring African coastal communities and kingdoms before other European powers.

With the cooperation of local rulers, first Portuguese and then other European traders set up trading posts along Africa’s coasts. Some local rulers traded slaves to the Europeans in exchange for gunpowder and cannons, giving those coastal governments a military advantage when battling neighboring villages. Thus many African city-states grew wealthy by agreeing to sell enslaved Africans to European slavers. *Dahomey*, in particular, grew stronger because it raided other villages for slaves and sold them to European merchants.

In central West Africa, Portuguese explorers, traders, and missionaries made inroads into the Kongo and Benin kingdoms. Artwork from these societies bears signs of European as well as African cultural influences. As early as the sixteenth century, Benin artisans incorporated images of the European “intruder” into their carvings and sculptures.

In 1498, Portuguese explorer *Vasco da Gama* invaded the Swahili city-states of East Africa, most of which were thriving commercial centers in the Indian Ocean trade. The Portuguese took over trade in Kilwa, Mombasa, and other city-states, throwing the region into a devastating decline.

**Literature** As in many other regions of the world, Africa produced influential literary works in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. The oral history passed along by griots later became the basis for written poetry and novels.

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Before the use of gunpowder weapons, walls provided defense. Remnants of these defensive walls still stand throughout the world, including in West Africa (in Benin, above), Central Asia (in Kyrgyzstan, below left), and in East Asia (China, below right).

**Africans and the Atlantic Slave Trade**

Slavery had existed in Africa long before Europeans sought slave labor for their investments in the Americas. For example, in many societies, the entire community shared the land. In order to establish positions of wealth and power, individuals not only showcased the property they owned, but also showcased their slaves. Europeans were also not the first foreigners to seek out African labor. As discussed earlier, Arab merchants during the Post-Classical Era (600–1450) often bought slaves during their travels to the Swahili Coast of East Africa. However, it was the Atlantic slave trade that wreaked the most havoc on African societies. (Test Prep: Compose a graphic organizer that compares the forms of slavery during Sub-Saharan Africa’s Early Colonial Period with slavery from 600 to 1450. See pages 161–172.)
Why Africans? Several factors converged to make Africa a target for slave raids by Europeans after 1450. As discussed in the previous chapter, slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean began toward the end of the sixteenth century, when European conquistadores sought fortunes in gold, silver, and sugar. Land was plentiful, but labor to make the land profitable was scarce.

Europeans initially forced indigenous people to do the hard labor of mining and farming, but European diseases wiped out large portions of these coerced laborers. The indigenous slaves who survived found it easy to escape bondage because they were more familiar with the territory, had social networks that could protect them, and could easily camouflage themselves within the native population. Repeated efforts to enslave Native Americans failed, although other efforts to coerce labor did have some success.

Labor for Plantations In North America, plantation owners recruited European indentured servants who would come to work for a specified period in exchange for passage, room, and board. However, most of these people were unaccustomed to the backbreaking agricultural working conditions and the climate of the Americas. In addition, indentured servants were required to work only for about seven years. If they survived their indenture, they became free laborers. Thus, landowners did not think of indigenous captives and European indentured servants as ideal workers.

During this era, Europeans sought sources of inexpensive labor in the Americas. Western European countries such as Portugal, Spain, and England were developing their naval technology, but Portugal was ahead of the others. In West Africa during the latter part of the 1400s, Portuguese trading fleets arrived in the Kingdom of the Kongo seeking slaves. Initially they took the enslaved Africans back to Europe to work as domestic servants.

Triangular Trade The Europeans’ desire for slaves in the Americas coupled with Portugal’s “discovery” of West Africa meant that Africa became the source for new labor. African slaves soon became part of a complex global trading system that was called the Atlantic trading system or the triangular trade based on a trade cycle with three “legs.” One version of triangular trade involved the transport of European manufactured goods such as firearms to West Africa, and from there enslaved Africans were shipped to the Americas. The final leg involved the transport of American tobacco and other cash crops to Europe.

Once other European nations noticed the success that the Portuguese enjoyed with sugar plantations in Brazil, the English, Dutch, and French worked to replicate that success in the Caribbean; by the 1700s, sugar production and rum (made from sugar) were financing fortunes in Britain, and to a lesser extent in France and the Netherlands.

Capture and Shipment of Slaves to the Americas Capturing Africans for slavery was invariably a violent affair. When African leaders along the coast realized that their kingdoms could economically benefit from the slave trade, they invaded neighboring societies in a quest for slaves to take back to the coast. At times, African rulers were also willing to hand over individuals
from the lower rungs of their own societies, such as prisoners of war, servants, or criminals. However, as King Afonso suggested to the King of Portugal in the quotation that opens this chapter, slave raids were not easily controllable. Though he had initially allowed slave trading in his kingdom, he had no intention of giving up his society’s elite to slavery, nor did he want Kongo to be depopulated. King Afonso also saw that his authority was undermined because his subjects were able to trade slaves for European goods without his involvement. Before the Europeans came, he had been able to control all trade in his domain.

Captive Africans, swept away from their families, were taken to holding pens in West Africa known as barracoons, or “slave castles.” The modern-day country of Ghana has preserved these “Points of No Return,” where thousands upon thousands of Africans said goodbye to their homeland for the last time. Today, tourists can visit one such holding prison—the so-called House of Slaves on Ile de Gorée (Gorée Island), on the coast of Senegal.

From these holding pens, slave traders next crammed their captives into the dank cargo section of a ship, providing them little water, food, or even room for movement. The grueling journey across the Atlantic was known as the Middle Passage, because it was the middle part of the captives’ journey. Many captured Africans staged rebellions en route, but most revolts were crushed. (The 1997 film Amistad provides an example of a successful Middle-Passage rebellion in 1839, in which Africans took control of the Spanish slave ship Amistad.) During the journey to the Americas, which usually took about six weeks, up to half of a ship’s captives might die. Historians estimate that over the hundreds of years of the Atlantic slave trade from the early 1500s to the mid-nineteenth century, approximately 25 percent of all African captives perished before reaching the Americas.

**African Presence in the Americas**

African cultures were not completely lost once captives arrived in the Americas. In fact, during the African Diaspora (dispersion of Africans out of Africa), enslaved Africans managed to retain certain aspects of their cultures in their new environments.

**Languages** With a few exceptions, Africans were not able to transplant their languages to the Americas. The captives were spirited away from their communities, and they soon found themselves on ships among captives from all across West Africa (and, on some slave ships, from across East Africa as well). Since captives were taken from myriad African cultural groups, most did not share a common language. Understandably, they found it difficult, if not impossible, to communicate en route. Because of their linguistic isolation on the ships and in the Americas, most Africans lost their languages after a generation.

In spite of this forced isolation from their cultures, West Africans managed to combine European colonizers’ languages (English, Spanish, French, or Portuguese, for example) with parts of their West African languages and grammatical patterns to create new languages known broadly as creole.
Because the Caribbean islands had a larger concentration of enslaved Africans than did North America, creole languages dominate there even today. In the United States, which had a smaller percentage of Africans in comparison to the total population, few examples of creole languages exist. One notable exception is the Gullah or Geechee language, of South Carolina and Georgia, in places where slaves once composed 75 percent of the population.

**Religions** African religions in the Americas provide powerful examples of religious syncretism, or the combining of different religious beliefs and practices. Africans melded aspects of Christianity that were introduced to them (or imposed upon them) with their West African religious traditions, such as drumming, dancing, and a belief in spirits that could “possess,” or take over and act through a person, often in evil ways. The traditions of *Santeria* in Cuba, *Vodun* in Haiti, and *Candomblé* in Brazil were all combinations of Christian and traditional African religions. Enslaved Africans in the United States also laid the roots for the African American church, a hybrid of Christianity and African spiritual traditions that remains one of the oldest and most stable institutions in African American communities today.

Some of the enslaved Africans, maybe 10 percent, practiced Islam. While some of the men who sailed with Columbus may have been Muslims, these enslaved Africans became the first significant presence of Islam in the Americas.

**Music** Africans brought their music with them. Today’s music, including gospel, blues, jazz, rock-n-roll, hip-hop, samba, reggae, and country music, are all influenced by African music. The syncopated rhythms and percussion in contemporary music can be traced back to West African musical traditions. Perhaps many African descendants maintained their musical traditions because enslaved Africans in America used music as a means of survival, singing tunes from home to help them endure long workdays as well as to communicate with other slaves, such as when planning an escape. They blended European Christian music with their own religious songs, known today as Negro spirituals—essential elements of American folk music history. Slaves also invented the banjo, which is very similar to stringed instruments found in West Africa.

**Food** Africans brought rice and okra (a green vegetable) to the Americas, as well as their knowledge of how to prepare these foods. The dish known as *gumbo*, popular in the southern United States, has roots in African cooking. With influences on language, music, food, and much more, African culture has had a profound and lasting impact on life in the Americas.

**Effects of the Slave Trade on Africa**

The Atlantic slave trade affected Africa in social, economic, and political ways. Those most affected were the peoples and civilizations of West Africa in present-day Ghana and Benin, from which most Africans were kidnapped or sold. Gender distributions in those regions became severely imbalanced, because more than two-thirds of those taken were males. The resulting predominance of women prompted a rise in *polygyny* (the taking of more than one wife) and forced women to assume duties that had traditionally been men’s jobs.
Economically, African societies that conducted slave raids, such as the Dahomey and the Oyo, became richer from selling their captives to Europeans. This trade also had political effects, because when a society like Dahomey exchanged slaves for guns, its raiders easily took advantage of rival societies that had no firearms. Without firearms, it was hard for neighboring groups to resist slave raids, so raiding societies became even richer and more fortified with firearms. Intergroup warfare thus became more common and bloodier as a result of the slave trade.

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade permanently weakened several West African kingdoms (such as Kongo), largely because of the violence that it caused among their societies, but also because African slave-raiding kingdoms became economically dependent on goods from Europe. Such societies were slow to develop more complex economies in which they produced their own goods. Thus, the slave trade set the stage for European imperialism of the late nineteenth century. European colonizers would have an easier time further conquering the African continent in that era. (To learn about later European conquests in Africa, see pages 497–498.)

While the Atlantic trading system weakened Africa in many ways, it also ultimately spurred population growth through an improved diet. The Columbian Exchange introduced new crops to the continent, such as the American crops maize, peanuts, and manioc (also known as yucca or cassava), which became staples in the African diet.

The End of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Due to diverse factors, the slave trade ended in most places during the nineteenth century. In Europe, particularly Great Britain, political and social changes would drive the push for abolition. Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century, such as Rousseau, wrote passionately about the right to freedom and the need for equality among all human beings. Enlightenment ideals formed the foundation for political revolutions in Europe and the Americas. Many intellectuals felt that slavery could not be reconciled with the Enlightenment values of democracy and equality, and thus the abolition movement was born. (See pages 394–413 for more information about the Enlightenment.)

People of European descent were not solely responsible for ending the slave trade in the Americas. Slave revolts were common, especially in those locations where enslaved Africans outnumbered free Europeans. In fact, slave revolts led by Toussaint L’Ouverture in the French colony of Saint Domingue in the late eighteenth century were so successful that they brought the end of slavery to the island in 1804, giving the newly independent nation of Haiti the distinction of being the first country in the Americas to end slavery. By 1888, slavery would be abolished throughout the Americas, usually through a gradual process of abolition. Haiti and the United States were the only two countries to end slavery through a full-scale war.
The Indian Ocean Slave Trade

While most Africans who were enslaved and transported to the Americas came from west and central Africa, there was a long-running slave trade in the eastern part of the continent. By routes overland or in the Indian Ocean, slaves from eastern Africa were sold to buyers in northern Africa, the Middle East, and India. Many were transported to the islands off the southeast coast of Africa, such as Madagascar. The trade reached its peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Slaves taken in the Indian Ocean trade suffered different fates than those taken across the Atlantic. Slaves in the Indian Ocean were more likely to work in seaports as laborers in the shipping industry and as household servants. Some worked as sailors or even soldiers. Living in towns or cities, they had more opportunity to develop communities and to work alongside free laborers. Slaves who ended up in Islamic communities had certain rights, such as the right to marry. As a result of the Indian Ocean slave trade, African words, musical styles, and customs can be found in Oman, India, and elsewhere.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WHAT WAS SLAVERY’S IMPACT?

Historians have long debated the legacy of transatlantic slavery. It has shaped both economic and cultural developments in the Americas.

Slavery and Capitalism In his book *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1944), historian Eric Williams, who was also the first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, posited that without slavery in the Americas, the European Industrial Revolution and capitalism as we know it would never have existed. Williams was thus one of the first to draw connections between the wealth of Western European countries and their involvement in the

**African Heritage** One public debate around African history in the Americas concerns the extent to which peoples of African descent actually retained remnants of African culture. The Black English controversy is a notable example of this debate. Linguists who study Creole and Black English have traced the grammatical patterns back to West Africa. For example, many West African languages do not conjugate the verb “to be,” and linguists also observe this lack of conjugation among some people of African descent in the Americas. The validity of Black English as a dialect sparked a huge controversy in the media, touching on the question of whether Africa had a central place in the discussion about African American history and culture.

Author Joseph Holloway addressed that issue in his book *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), showcasing research on the aspects of African culture that continue to exist in the Americas in music, religion, and other areas, with particular case studies of New Orleans and of Gullah culture in South Carolina. The book provides a unique perspective on the many connections among the cultures of the African Diaspora.

**Slavery and Industrial Power** Most recently, in 2014, historian Edward E. Baptist published *Slavery: The Half That Has Never Been Told*. Baptist argued that the expansion of slavery and cotton production in the United States in the nineteenth century provided the foundation for the country’s rise to its status as a global industrial power.

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### KEY TERMS BY THEME

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<th>Environment</th>
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<td>Atlantic trade system</td>
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Questions 1.1 to 1.3 refer to the map below.

THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE, 1500–1900

1.1 This map supports the conclusion about the Atlantic slave trade that the greatest number of slaves was sent
(A) to North America to work on cotton plantations
(B) to Brazil and the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations
(C) to North America to work on sugar plantations
(D) to the Caribbean to work in mines and on farms

1.2 Which statement about the Atlantic slave trade accurately adds important information to what the map shows?
(A) The journey across the Atlantic was a grueling one for the captives, and many staged successful rebellions on board.
(B) The majority of the slaves were taken to Brazil and the Caribbean, and a much smaller number were taken to North America.
(C) The journey across the Atlantic was a grueling one for the captives, and many died before reaching the Americas.
(D) The Atlantic slave trade effectively ended slave trade between Central Africa and the Middle East.
1.3 What would need to be added to the map to describe the main elements of the “triangular trade” that accompanied the Atlantic slave trade?

(A) European manufactured goods going to Africa and American cash crops to Europe
(B) American manufactured goods going to Africa and European cash crops to Europe
(C) European manufactured goods going to South America and African cash crops to Europe
(D) African artifacts going to Europe and American manufactured goods and cash crops to Africa

Questions 2.1 and 2.2 refer to the passage below.

“Demonized as an enemy of the faith by the Muslim narrative sources, yet lionized as a warrior hero in the oral tradition, Sunni Ali, who reigned from 1464 to 1492, is one of the most controversial figures of the African Middle Ages. . . . Relying on a swift and mobile cavalry force as well as on naval control of the Niger River, Sunni Ali had conquered the agriculturally rich central Niger or ‘inland delta,’ including the wealthy and scholarly cities of Timbuktu and Jenne, by the 1470s. . . . He was well aware that a vast empire could not be held together by military conquests alone, but need an effective and efficient administrative structure as well. Indeed, the organization of Songhay government which was developed to a great degree under Sunni Ali differed substantially from previous Sudanic patterns of empire. These had been based more on alliances and relationships with tributary states than on the high degree of centralization characteristic of Songhay.”

“Kingdoms of the Medieval Sudan,” Xavier University, webusers.xula.edu

2.1 The Songhay empire was unlike the empires of Ghana and Mali because the Songhay

(A) created a stronger central government to rule the empire
(B) expanded the territory under its control
(C) was ruled by a Muslim
(D) was the first empire to trade gold extensively

2.2 Based on the last sentence of this passage, which European ruler or thinker was Sunni Ali most like?

(A) John Calvin
(B) William and Mary
(C) Louis XIV
(D) John Locke
Questions 3.1 to 3.3 refer to the passages below.

“Sir, Your Highness should know how our Kingdom is being lost . . . since this is caused by the excessive freedom given by your agents and officials to the men and merchants who are allowed to come to this Kingdom to set up shops. . . . We cannot reckon how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives . . . they grab them and get them to be sold.”

Afonso I, leader of the Kongo Kingdom, letter to the King of Portugal, July 1526

“We the King of Kilwa [a Swahili city state], Sultan Hasan son of Sultan Ibrahim son of Sultan Yusuf . . . , give our word to M. Morice, a French national, that we will give him a thousand slaves annually at twenty piastres each and that he shall give the King a present of two piastres for each slave. No other but he shall be allowed to trade for slaves, whether French, Dutch, Portuguese, [etc.], until he shall have received his slaves and has no wish for more.”

Slave trade agreement, 1776

3.1 The interactions described in the passages above are best understood in the context of

(A) African kingdoms participating in the slave trade
(B) African kingdoms insisting on a halt to the slave trade
(C) Europeans forcing the slave trade on unwilling African kingdoms
(D) European nations giving in to the requests of African kingdoms

3.2 Afonso’s major complaint about slavery was that

(A) Europeans were taking too many valuable young men as slaves
(B) Europeans were not paying enough money for slaves
(C) the Portuguese were not helping Afonso manage the vast slave trade
(D) the Portuguese were failing to prevent other Europeans from seizing slaves

3.3 In both passages, an African leader is attempting to

(A) give Europeans complete control over the slave trade
(B) negotiate with Europeans so ordinary Africans could benefit from the slave trade
(C) regulate the slave trade so his kingdom could profit from it
(D) assure that the slave trade would end by becoming unprofitable
Question 1 refers to the passage below.

“Vodou [Vodun] as we know it in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora today is the result of the pressures of many different cultures and ethnicities of people being uprooted from Africa and imported to Hispanola [the island that includes Haiti] during the African slave trade. Under slavery, African culture and religion was suppressed, lineages were fragmented, and people pooled their religious knowledge and out of this fragmentation became culturally unified. In addition to combining the spirits of many different African and Indian nations, pieces of Roman Catholic liturgy have been incorporated to replace lost prayers or elements; in addition images of Catholic saints are used to represent various spirits or ‘mistè’ (‘mysteries,’ actually the preferred term in Haiti), and many saints themselves are honored in Vodou in their own right. This syncretism allows Vodou to encompass the African, the Indian, and the European ancestors in a whole and complete way.”

Haitian Consulate, “Haitian Vodou,” www.haitianconsulate.org

1. Answer parts A and B.
   A. Describe TWO ways that Vodou is an example of religious syncretism.
   B. Describe a specific example of religious syncretism other than Vodou that resulted from the Atlantic slave trade.

2. Answer parts A, B, and C.
   A. Explain ONE economic cause of the growth of the Atlantic slave trade.
   B. Explain ONE social effect of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa.
   C. Explain ONE economic effect of the Atlantic slave trade in the Americas.