
UNIT 15 AFRICA

Structure

- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 North Africa
 - 15.2.1 A Chronology
 - 15.2.2 Pharaonic Egypt
 - 15.2.3 Pyramids and Egyptian Religion
 - 15.2.4 Kingship
 - 15.2.5 Organization of Government and Society
- 15.3 West Africa
 - 15.3.1 Background
 - 15.3.2 Some Major Monarchies of West Africa
 - 15.3.3 Society, Economy and Polity
- 15.4 South Africa
 - 15.4.1 Mapping the Communities
 - 15.4.2 Economy
 - 15.4.3 The Bride Wealth
 - 15.4.4 Organization of Government
- 15.5 Summary
- 15.6 Exercises

15.1 INTRODUCTION

For a long period of time the knowledge about Africa was limited to some areas of North Africa which came in contact with the Asia and Europe from ancient times. However, very little was known about the vast areas of Africa called sub-Saharan Africa. In the 15th century Europeans made inroads in Africa but it was with a limited purpose of indulging in slave trade. These slaves were captured and taken to work in plantations in Americas. In the 19th century the colonization of large parts of Africa began and Europeans ruled over them in the 19th and larger parts of 20th centuries. Africa was seen by them as less civilized, less developed and at an infant stage of development in its history. But again, as in the case of Latin Americas, so also here, this view has been questioned and historical and archeological research has found instances of indigenous African civilizations, which compare favourably with any contemporary civilization of the world. We shall see some of them here.

It is very difficult to discuss in one Unit the history of such a vast continent with different languages, cultures, social and economic life. We would, therefore, confine our discussion in this Unit to a few selected regions only. In an attempt to be geographically distributive in as vast a territory as Africa, we have chosen three different civilizations, one from the South, one from the West and another from the North.

In each of these regions the features are not uniformly discussed. In each we will take up the salient features specific to the region. First we will discuss North Africa. You have already studied in detail the Egyptian civilization in

Block 2. Again we are including it as a section of this Unit to have a cohesive discussion on Africa.

In this section we will focus on the polity of Pharaonic Egypt. We will also provide a brief account of society and religion during the period. In the second section of the Unit we will take account of West Africa. Our discussion will mainly be confined to Ghana, Mali and Kanem. A brief account of monarchies in this region would be provided. Some space would be devoted to society, economy and polity also. In the third section we will cover South Africa. In South Africa we intend to discuss different communities, society economy and organization of government.



Map: 3 (Not to Scale)
Map of Africa

15.2 NORTH AFRICA

The Nile Valley civilization has been a fascination for not only archeologists and historians but also for the common tourists. The high Pyramids and the Sphinx have been architectural marvels of the ancient civilization of this region. It has often been said that Egypt was more of an Arabic civilization than an African one. But this has been refuted. It has been asserted, that “Egypt was African in its way of writing, in its culture, and in its way of thinking, in spite of the fact that it borrowed from outside cultures as it is situated at the convergence of outside influences”.

15.2.1 A Chronology

The Ancient Civilization of the Nile Valley dates back to prior to 3000 B.C. Historians have, for convenience, classified the history of the region in the following chronological fashion. First is the Pre-dynastic settlements, then the Pharaonic Egypt divided into Old, Middle and New Kingdoms and spanning 31 dynasties till 332B.C. The next was the Ptolemic or the Hellenic period following the conquest of Alexander the Great. The Romans occupied Egypt and ruled over it from 30 B.C to 345A.D. Thereafter, the Byzantine rulers were the masters of Egypt. From 642A.D., the Arabs became the rulers of Egypt till 1517 A.D. , when the Ottoman Turks took over. In 1798 A.D., the French entered Egypt for a brief period and the British occupied it from 1882 A.D.

15.2.2 Pharaonic Egypt

The Pharaohs’ Egypt has also been chronologically mapped as follows. The first interval known as the Old Kingdom was founded by Zoser or Djoser of the Third Dynasty. During the entire length of this kingdom there was no standing army of the King or the Pharaoh. Around 2200 B.C., the Old Kingdom ended with the Sixth Dynasty. During the Old Kingdom the first Pyramids were built. The Old Kingdom was followed by almost two centuries of rivalry and fighting between the nobles of various principalities, which is known as the First Intermediate period.

By 2050 B.C., in the Eleventh Dynasty, again centralized rule was established and continued till 1786 B.C. This rule is known as the Middle Kingdom and had its capital at Thebes in Upper Egypt. This period is significant for its focus on utilitarian projects such as construction of drainage system and irrigation facilities. Few pyramids were built during this period. The Egyptian religion also seems to have changed a little in its emphasis on this life than on life after death as in the Old kingdom. From 1786 B.C. to 1560 B.C., again the rule of Pharaohs was challenged by the Hyksos (or the rulers of foreign land). The Hyksos were tribes of western Asia who used horse and chariot in wars. This period of foreign invasion and instability was known as the Second Intermediate Period.

The rulers of the Upper Egypt revolted against the Hyksos and finally in the year 1560 B.C., Ahmose, who founded the Eighteenth Dynasty, succeeded in driving the invaders out and establishing indigenous rule in Egypt again. This was the beginning of the New Kingdom or the Empire, which continued till 1087 B.C. During the New Kingdom/Empire, the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and

the Twentieth Dynasties ruled. During these rules, the Pharaoh had a standing army, unlike the earlier ones.

15.2.3 Pyramids and Egyptian Religion

The mention of Egypt commonly evokes the images of the Pyramids and the Sphinx. Djoser, the second king of the 3rd dynasty was the first one who is given credit for building the earliest pyramid. The pyramid that he got built is generally known as the Step Pyramid of Saqqarah. A short distance from Saqqarah, towards the south, is the more sophisticated rhomboidal pyramid at Dahshur. This was built by a king named Snefru of the 4th dynasty. The other well-known pyramids are found at Giza which were built by pharaohs Khufu, Khafre and Menkure

The pyramids were built to house the mummy of the dead ruler. The burial chamber of the ruler was surrounded by other burials as well as a complex of temples built to worship gods and the dead rulers. These burials include the ruler's servants, wives and sometimes children too. Within the tombs were placed furniture, jewelry other crafted objects and some personal belonging of the deceased. As the times passed by, the nobility also started having mastabas, or rectangular stone burials close to the pyramids of the rulers. The building of pyramids suffered a set back during the end of the Old Kingdom because of civil war, political instability and economic depression. But this architecture again revived under the New Kingdom (1539-1075 BC). It was during the regime of the New Kingdom that the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings got built at Thebes.

The Egyptians believed in the continuity of life after death. When a king died it was believed that he would continue to rule in his after life as Osiris or the dead king. Therefore they kept many precious and useable goods for the dead king in the pyramid. Cults were developed after the dead kings and they were worshipped along with other gods in temples.

Before the political unification in 2925 BC, there were various local cults and guardian deities. After unification a syncretism started which could associate any number of gods with many others without any apparent contradiction. The sun god Ra/Re had universal acceptance because of his universal presence. Temple was a place where people used to assemble and worship. It was thus the symbol of their locality and community. At times local temples also served as national symbols such as the temple of Ra at Heliopolis during the Old Kingdom, and the temple of Neith at Sais during the 26th dynasty. Temples also, with the passage of time, had assumed major economic and political roles. Towards the end of the New Kingdom, the temple of Amon Ra at Karnak was the chief political authority in the entire Upper Egypt. The temple, or the priests to be more precise, had not only religious obligations but administrative responsibilities also, such as looking after the arable lands, flocks, mines and granaries, treasuries, river-transport, dispensing justice and so on.

The Pharaohs were ruling as the agents of god or sons of god on earth and were known as Horus. Horus was supposed to look after the maa't, which was justice/fairplay or a perfect order created by gods for man on earth. We find in the papyrus writing the King Semsret-I said, "He (the god HorAkhty) created me as one who should do that which he had done, and to carry out that which

he commanded should be done. He appointed me as herdsman of this land, for he knew who would keep it in order for him.” In the literature at the end of the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom, the theme of chaotic society abounds, where chaos was caused by natural calamities, foreign aggression, absence of ‘justice’, etc. The king was supposed to be generous and pious a herdsman for such a society. It is, of course, quite difficult to map the changes in the concept and perception of the king of the Egyptians, for the entire Pharaonic period due to lack of sources available so far.

15.2.4 Kingship

The Egyptians believed that the kingship was a divine office. But this divine office was not free from worldly games of power such as family intrigues, usurpation etc. In a book, which is a manual for the use of royal power for the coming generations of Kings, named the ‘Instruction of King Amenemhat’, the King mentions about the intrigues and treachery surrounding the divine office of the King. The dynastic changes in the history of Pharaonic regimes have not been explained fully. Usurpation has been established at least in one case. King Amenemhat-I, the founder of the 12th Dynasty, was the vizier of the previous King.

Disputes of succession of Kingship also could not be ruled out. The rule that the son or the eldest son (primogeniture) succeeding the King, might have been flouted. The practice of co-regency or overlapping reigns during the 12th dynasty, in which the heir was made the king while the father was alive and his reign was recognized from the time of declaration is an attestation of the fact that rules were not faithfully followed. There were also Kings, such as Seti-I, Ramses-II, Ramses-III and Ramses-IV, who are said to have been chosen as successor of the throne by their fathers in face of stronger claimants.

The tombs of the princes were not prominent or commensurate with their status, where as women (queens, princesses, concubines) of the King found place in royal pyramids and their tombs were distinct. Even the princes did not find place in the administrative texts of the Old Kingdom, may be they were not high in the administrative hierarchy. This according to a historian may have “contributed to the stability of government during the sensitive moment of succession.”

The power and authority of the divine office of the Pharaohs were at times contested by the powerful provincial governors and officers. The fall of the Old Dynasty was caused largely by the great chiefs or prefects of the southern provinces. Similarly the power of the Theban priests and the generals of the southern military proved to be the bane of the New Kingdom. The social costs of such royal crisis and how did the royal crisis affect the common people of Egypt is not known.

The king was not only an agent of the god to ‘herd’ the Egyptians. He was also the chief arbitrator of justice and keeper of the maat or order. His chief consultant and advisor was the vizier or the prime minister. The continuity of this office under successive kings for long periods made them quite powerful. The organization of production and generation of revenue, maintenance of law and order were the concerns of the prince or the priests of the temples. This is elicited from the list of titles and genealogies. One prince, Nefer-Seshem-Shesat,

of the 5th dynasty, was the vizier and the overseer of the Kings works. Another prince is referred to as the overseer of the works of the king and a commander of an army. There were titles of officials such as, 'the elder of the portal,' from which it is difficult to know the duties of the official.

15.2.5 Organization of Government and Society

All the title holding official were not necessarily princes or of the royal household. But all of them were literate or scribes. The papyrus or the flexible writing medium made out of the tree of the same name was a unique contribution of the Egyptians to human civilization. There were scribal schools, which under strict discipline trained people in the art of writing. This knowledge of writing was essential for any office in the Pharaonic Egypt. And the officialdom was a caste in itself enjoying not only power but also luxury, which were denied to the illiterate peasants of their society. Architects, engineers, military commanders, religious ritualists, accountants all were scribes. These scribes had exhibited a remarkable skill in administrative and accounting jobs. The texts they have left behind along with other scholarly works speak volumes about how systematic and well organized was the Pharaonic state. We also get details, of the organization of the provincial government, the various types of priests and their duties, the working of the arable land, mines, river transport, granaries, rituals, justice etc. by the royal officials and the priests.

Their luxury as evidenced by the findings in the Pyramids, speaks volumes about it. The administration was organized very efficiently. The entire kingdom was divided into *nomes* and there was a hierarchy of officials to look after the nomes who were mostly from the royal families. The hierarchy of priests is also indicated. The *tjaty* (vizier) was the prime minister and the sole advisor of the Pharaoh.

The main resource of work and labour were the people from lower strata. The wheel was not used by them. Therefore they used to drag heavy loads, for building and other purposes, on the slush and mud after floods. Both high flood and low flood were harnessed for agriculture. Because of the fertility of the flood plains one crop in a year was sufficient to leave plenty of surplus to be used in the building of gigantic structures as well as the running of the institutions such as the temples and kingship and scribes. After the agricultural operations labour was available for other activities.

The absence of wheel was no deterrent to transport system. The Egyptians had developed a network of waterways and built boats of varying sizes and tonnage. Agricultural products and food-grains were transported to granaries and markets from the fields mainly through this transport network.

15.3 WEST AFRICA

According to available archeological evidences, West Africa, as other regions of Africa, was dotted with human settlements of Stone Age and Iron Age civilizations,. From 11th century onwards, we have, along with archeological evidence, the writings of Arab geographers and scholars about West Africa. And it is about this period, that is, from the 11th to 16th century A.D. (when Europeans start arriving) which we mainly discuss in this section. West Africa generally speaking, consists of the area between the western borders of modern Mauritania to the eastern borders of modern Nigeria.

15.3.1 Background

Before the Arab influence came, there were a few monarchical states in this region. Important of these were Kawkaw (which was perhaps the nucleus of the later Songhai kingdom of Gao), Malel (to the South of Ghana and which became later on the Mande kingdom of Mali) besides Ghana (not the present day Ghana but far removed from it towards the West) in the west and Kanem in the east near lake Chad.

These kingdoms may appear small in terms of geographical area as compared to later ones, yet these were developed state systems with established towns and cities. They also had extensive networks of markets and trade centres which were supported by developed agricultural hinterland. There is archeological evidence of evolution of a cattle-herding and settled agricultural economy among a mixed population of Libyan Berber and African 'black' agricultural population in the Sahara by at least 4000 B.C., which is when the Nile Valley civilization was taking similar shape. By 2000B.C., when Sahara desiccated and took its present form as a desert, there was out-flowing of population. In the process, it appears, the 'blacks' concentrated in the Savannahs south of Sahara. Through conflicts over land, water rights, and exploitation and control of agricultural surpluses in the extremely fertile land of Nile Valley, the pharaohs built dramatic kingships and spectacular civilizations. At around the same time less spectacular monarchies evolved here in the savannahs of West Africa. In fact, the major West African monarchies developed not in the river valleys of Senegal and Niger or around lake Chad, rather in between them and the edges of south Sahara. Trans-Saharan trade which was carried through this region was the mainstay of these monarchies and determined their size and nature considerably. The West African communities had gold, ivory, and other agricultural commodities to offer in return for salt, which was scarce and was essential. Salt was not available except in the coastal region. They also had plenty of iron, which they had been working, in some instances, since 500B.C. In return of iron they collected copper, other metals and Arab horses. They also could offer slaves.

This trans-Saharan trade could be older than the desert. Some surviving rock engravings in Sahara indicate existence of horse-drawn chariots and horses, the former for raids and the later for long distance trade. The engravings also indicate a line of communication from Fezzan and South Morocco to the valleys of Senegal and Niger, attesting an interest of the northerners in the alluvial gold of those river valleys. The control of this trade and the trade routes/trade centres had gone into the making of the powerful ancient kingdom of Ghana in West Africa. The "Hamitic hypotheses" which proposed that the development (of political institutions and others) among the 'blacks' was the result of infiltration of the Hamitic speaking Berbers (who were nomad pastoralists) from Libya, does not stand any scrutiny. First of all, not all infiltration was by Hamitic people. There were 'black' dynasties also as the Kanems. That there was infiltration, is not disputed. But the infiltrators, wherever they succeeded was due to the assimilation into existing societies and culture and appropriation of existing political institutions.

15.3.2 Some Major Monarchies of West Africa

Ghana was a powerful kingdom. According to archaeologists the description

of its capital by the Corbodian geographer Abu Ubayd al-Bakr, may be that of Kumbi Saleh of southern Mauritania. Kumbi Saleh was divided into two distinct parts. One part was built in the local African style with round mud houses and a walled one as the palace of the king. The other part of the city had houses built of stone and had a few mosques. The quarter perhaps was for the merchants of the North. The city was spread over more than two square kilometers and the adjacent cemeteries were also quite extensive. The two parts of the city were linked and had other residential settlements. Al-Bakr described that the king was ruling as a divine representative on earth. It was the King or the heir apparent, who could put on sewn clothes besides other ritual apparels, turbans, necklaces and bracelets. Common men, who appeared before the King, used to prostrate before him with their heads powdered with soil. This tradition continued for a very long time and was found during the Mali empire too. The King was succeeded by his sister's son, and on death was buried under a large mound of earth along with the bodies of a number of his retainers. His army was large, which enforced subordination of his vassal kings. Archeological artifacts indicate its relation with North Africa and the long-distance trade of the city's inhabitants. The prosperity of ancient Ghana depended on this trade which was conducted chiefly in gold from south and salt from Sahara and other manufactured commodities and copper from North Africa. The King used to control and tax this trade. The majority of the people of kingdom of Ghana were probably of northern Mande stock.

During the 10th century the monarchs of Ghana extended their domination over the Sanhajah, a conglomeration of Berber pastoralist tribes around Audaghost. The Sanhajah were suppliers of salt and North African goods to the Ghanaians. This domination not only upset the economic balance between the agricultural Ghana and the pastoralist Sanhajah, but also unleashed a process of counter-domination by the Sanhajahs. The Sanhajah tribes were partially Islamized people like the Berbers, and soon became part of a militant and puritanical Islamic movement known as the Almoravid. This helped them settle differences between tribes and unite to expand their domination over the productive lands of nearby areas. By the end of 11th century they had complete domination over the ancient Kingdom of Ghana. Thus started the Almoravid rule of Ghana. The indigenous rulers and traders were converted to Islam. The rulers, in spite of the conversion, continued with their ancestral rites and land cults, with the explicit purpose of not getting rejected by the subjects who were not Muslims.

But by the beginning of the 13th century, the depredations of the Almoravids and their internecine fights led to the undermining of the agricultural economy and power of Ghana. And now the Mande speaking communities towards the south, who were till now the vassals of Ghana, raised their head against their domination.. In 1235 A.D., Suniata, the Mande speaking Keita King of Mali, in the well-irrigated and fertile lands of the uppermost Niger valley came to incorporate Ghana in his territory. Gold was found abundantly in his land. The Keita clan had the singular objective of extending their power along the Niger bend towards Timbuktu and Gao, which were two major centres of the gold trade with North. But the power struggle within the Almoravids of Ghana, which led to the rise of the Keitas, also had dislocating impact on the trade routes towards the North. Because of this impact the northern terminus of the trade routes were no more within south Morocco but shifted towards Ifriqyah

(i.e., Tunisia and eastern Algeria). So the river Niger was becoming more important for trade with the North than Bambuk or other cities as the southern centres of the same trade as a shorter route. By the 14th century the Dyula (Dioula) Mande merchants were going for trade as far east as Hausa (a city-state). The success of the Mali kingdom and the Mande merchants depended on their control over the Niger water-ways. And in this struggle for control the Mali Kingdom became weak. By the 15th century Songhai community, a non-Mande community, who were fishing and canoeing in the middle Niger, started laying a claim to the control of the waterways. They were also vassal of the Mali kingdom. In late 15th century, King/Sultan Sonni Ali, a Songhai, established his supremacy over the Mali kingdom and made Gao the Capital of the Songhai kingdom. And since then the hegemony of the Songhai continued for sometime in West Africa. This enlarged Songhai kingdom, however, was short-lived. In real terms it could not establish its hegemony over the multiple monarchies/states in the west in the tradition of the Ghana and Mali kingdoms. Sultan Ali could extend the Songhai rule eastwards through Hausaland and northwards to Air. In the east, there was the Kingdom of Kanem, whose rulers had been converted to Islam in the 11th century, and by the 14-15th century the kingdom declined in its power and influence over the resources, people and the trade. This decline was due to the infighting of its ruling elite, though it could somewhat revive in the former province of Bornu.

By the 16th century the Songhais had extended their influence over Kanem in the east and also upto the salt mines of Taghza, close to the Moroccan borders in the north. This provoked an invasion of the Songhai land by the Sadi dynasty of Morocco in 1591. The Moroccans came with firearms and 4000 soldiers, took Gao and Timbuktu and collected plenty of booty. But they had no means of retaining and administering the lands they conquered. By the end of 16th century, one Idris Alawma of Bornu, revived the Kanem-Bornu state again for a short period of time, which was followed by the control of much smaller Hausa kingdoms as Kano & Kastina. By the 16th century, the Europeans had also started settling for gold and slaves. The history of West Africa, before the arrival of Europeans was dominated by the ascendancy of the Falunas.

15.3.3 Society, Economy and Polity

The information about the society and economy during the Ghana, the Mali and the Songhai regimes in West Africa is quite sketchy. New researches and archeological findings are adding to the information everyday.

The Ghana kingdom had its agricultural production, which was not only sufficient to feed the entire kingdom but also helped in the consolidation of the Kingdom. Yet, the Ghana kingdom derived its economic power by imposing tax on the Saharan trade. From the north salt was passed to the south and from the south gold and copper were in demand. This seemed to have continued till the Songhays regime. The king was a divine figure under the Ghanas. The different ethnic groups and clans were following their customs. During the heyday of the Mali empire of the Mande or Mandigo ruler of the Keita tribe, who were partly Islamized by the 12th century, the society was of matrilineal families, as the children belonged to the mothers lineage. A few families, which claimed common ancestry constituted a village. The traditional village chiefs – called *dugu-tigi* – were the first and the smallest administrative unit of the

empire. Above this, were the clan units with their chiefs. Some of the clans together constituted the province under a provincial governor called the farin. Provinces, largely organized as ethnic groups, were allowed to retain many of their local and indigenous systems of law and faith under the regime of the mansas or the Mali emperors/kings. This led to the strengthening of the empire as a federation of various ethnic tribes with their own beliefs, customs, 'laws', etc.

The commoners were basically the producers for the empire. They were engaged in agriculture, animal-rearing, fishing, mining and worked as craftsmen for non agricultural production. During the Mansa rule, crafts were made hereditary and specialization was encouraged. Though the Mali empire was known for its gold, the economy was sustained by the agriculture and many nobles were also engaged in it. Millet, beans and rice were the chief crops of the western provinces of Mali, which were watered by rivers and also rain. Hunting was also closely associated with agriculture. The Somono of the upper Niger, the Bozo of the middle Niger, and the Sorko in the neighbourhood of Timbuktu were clans that specialized in fishing and exported smoked and dried fish to the entire empire. The Mabo clan similarly specialized in weaving and dyeing. The Siaki clan worked the gold. Plenty of gold and copper were exported by the Mali empire and its imports included salt and kola-nuts. The dioula and the wanganas were the traders who used to carry these items in caravans of donkeys and other drought animals.

During the Songhay ascendancy the scenario seems to have continued as it was in the Mali Empire. There is no indication of any revolutionary change in terms of technology or governance entailing consequent changes in taxation and subjugation of the primary producers of the society. Peasants lived in hamlets near their lands and cultivated it extensively. Rural population was dense. They produced rice, millets and beans and many other vegetables, again an indication of similar crops as in the earlier regimes. Fishermen as other crafts men also, were partly fishermen and partly peasants, tilling their own lands. The division of such labour was seasonal.

Towns were also quite populated and housed not only nobles/aristocrats who took care of government, army and priesthood, but craftsmen also. Various smiths were living in towns, which were chiefly trade centres. The traders were mostly foreigners, and they gave a cosmopolitan character to the towns. The chief towns during the Songhay were, Timbuktu, Gao, Jenne. The aristocracy had a luxurious life, which is attested by their big houses and the garments they used. The presence of numerous courtesans is indicative of the luxurious lifestyle of the aristocrats and the moral laxity prevalent in the upper echelons of the society. Slaves, captured during war and by other means, were a labour reserve for all the West African regimes.

15.4 SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is a modern nation state, which is of recent origin in comparison to the long history of human civilization it had had. It is hemmed in the north by Botswana and Namibia and surrounded by sea on other sides.

15.4.1 Mapping the Communities

We have evidence to suggest that human settlement existed in the southern region even before the beginning of Christian Era. The evidences of their existence suggest that they were largely hunter-gatherers, meaning they lived by hunting wild animals, fishing and gathering fruits and edible plants. These communities were called 'Bushmen' by the European colonizers of Africa, when they came in this region in the 17th century.

Thereafter, it sounds historically plausible, that pastoralists arrived on the historical scene of South Africa. Whether some of the hunting-gathering communities, (under certain outside influence or its internal dynamics, or otherwise), started domesticating sheep or cattle and became pastoralist, or there was immigration of pastoralists from the north, has not been conclusively established. These pastoralists were called 'Hottentots' by the European colonizers.

Thereafter, probably, arrived the mixed-farmer or part pastoralists and part settled farmers. These mixed farmers used iron (for making digging sticks), made pottery and were settled in villages for reasonably long period of time. These were called the 'Kaffirs' by the Europeans. Though we have placed hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and mixed farmers chronologically one after the other, they may have existed simultaneously (as they were noticed by the European colonizers in the 18th and 19th centuries) for a very long period of time.

The communities were differentiated ethno-linguistically also, as San (who were the indigenous inhabitants of the Cape, west of Algoa Bay) and were largely hunter-gatherers, then Khoikhoi towards a little north of the Sans, who were largely pastoralists, and Nguni, the mixed-farmers, (who inhabited the narrow coastal plain between the Drakensberg mountains and the sea) and Sotho-Tswana (the inhabitants of the high veld) etc. The Nguni language is further differentiated into Zulu, spoken in the north, and Xhosa, spoken in the south, and the communities named after the dialects, (both mutually intelligible). The languages of the high veld, Sotho, Tswana and Pedi, are more deeply differentiated than the Nguni languages.

The Khoikhoi were, it has been said, pastoralists and the San were hunter-gatherers. However, it seems that when some pastoralists lost their herds, either due to some cattle epidemic or to some rival tribe in a conflict, they again took to hunting and gathering. In due course when some of them managed, largely through banditry, to capture some herds, they resumed the practice of pastoralists. It has been observed that there were San in northern Namibia also, who were settled in villages and possessed copper mines unlike other Sans.

Similarly the southern Bantu speakers as the Nguni and Sotho-Tswana could move from one community into another and were assimilated into the new culture and adopted the new language. Therefore, it is very difficult to classify the people into exclusive communities as hunter-gatherers/ pastoralists and settled mixed-agriculturists or Ngunis/ Sans.

15.4.2 Economy

The mixed-farming was the most productive economy, it was more productive than both the pastoralists and the hunter-gatherers. The mixed-farming practices included not only agriculture and metallurgy, but also a degree of pastoralism (cattle-rearing) as well as some amount of hunting and gathering (supplementary food from the abundant game available and collecting indigenous plant and plant products). The mixed-farmers, therefore, had a stable and richer supply of food than the hunters or the pastoralists, and had communities of denser population that created political units of chiefdoms.

The Bantu speakers, (i.e., the Nguni, Xhosa and Zulu speakers), had harnessed the surface deposits of magnetite. They used to smelt it and by re-heating and hammering shape it as spear-heads, hatchets and hoes. It was a major trade item also. They also had the skill to use the copper deposits found in northern Botswana and northern Transvaal, which was used to make hair ornaments, earrings, necklaces, bells, anklets and crowns.

Cattle overwhelmingly formed the mainstay of the economy of the Southern Bantu societies. Cows had entered the idiom and proverbs and songs, common in the South Bantu societies, as for example, "Cattle are bank of a Mosotho." In Mpondo, there were more than fifty different terms for describing the cattle and at least five different terms to describe the horns. Historian Elizabeth Isichei writes, "Wealth could be stored in the form of herds, which offered a certain measure of protection against famine. But above all, cattle were valued as a medium of exchange, needed to obtain wives and through them children: 'Cattle beget children.' The ownership of cattle led to an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and may also have contributed to an increasing polarization of gender roles which some find reflected in the ruins of fifteenth century Zimbabwe. The bride-wealth (*bogadi* in Sesotho and Setswana, *labola* in the Nguni languages) could only be made in cattle. A fortunate Khoikhoi elite herder could acquire a large number of cattle and sheep by which he could have many wives. He could also help his sons with them as well as 'buy' clients and become political leader or ruler. Khoikhoi society was thus a plutocracy. The ruler's authority depended on his wealth, if his wealth diminished or lost to his enemy, his authority also collapsed. But usually, the ruler's authority was quite stable till the advent of the colonial powers.

Gradually over centuries agro-pastoralism came to be practised by the Bantu communities in the entire eastern half of South Africa and northern Namibia,. The agro-pastoralists cleared the bushes and turned areas into cultivable land, and thus contributed further by restricting the deadly tsetse fly, which posed a threat to both human beings and cattle.

A very sharp division of labour between the sexes characterized the agro-pastoralist society. The men were responsible for the livestock. Herding was their main pre-occupation. This, of course, did not require much involvement as the younger boys were deputized to do that during the times of peace. The boys also used to tend the cattle at the early age of ten years or so . They, also from a very tender age, used to get trained in milking the cows, thickening and souring the milk into *amasi*, butchering animals, and working the leather from the animal skin for different uses, all of which were the domain of the men. Men also used to build byres, *kraals* for the cattle with poles and brushwood.

Smithing was another exclusive vocation of the men. In eastern Transvaal region copper and iron were found abundantly and were processed by the local men who had been following it for hundreds of years. In the Olifants river drainage system some men specialized in manufacture of salts from the crusts formed by the seepage from saline springs. These regions traded with other regions where such goods were not available. The South African villages were not self sufficient as had been suggested by many a European visitors to the place. The Xhosa chiefdoms used to exchange cattle for copper and iron goods, and the Ngunis were linked with others in a similar way. Hunter-gatherers also exchanged cooper goods or ornaments with agro-pastoralists for meat and cattle. Metal goods were prized by the populace. In 1689, a Dutch traveller reported that a traveller with metal goods was never safe there. So far no evidence of any market place has been found, which suggests that there was only relay trade between various communities inhabiting different places. The people of South Africa possibly did not use any oxen for transport, and the exchanges were barter exchange. Trading too was the occupation of men.

Zulu men, it has been said, used to 'build huts, keep them in repair, erect and renew various fences, to hew the bush,.. .from such spots as the females are to cultivate; to milk cows and generally tend all stock... Many elder men.. (were).. constantly engaged with special offices.. .. doctoring, divining, metal-working, wood-carving, basket-making etc.' War, politics and all public affairs was the job of men.

In 1635, it was reported of some South African community that the women do all the work such as planting, tilling the earth with a stick etc. A large number of Europeans have mentioned that women were over-burdened with manual chores. The women used to take care of the entire agricultural operations after the land was cleared by men.

Clearing of the land had to be done periodically as they were practising swidden agriculture, that is, they cultivated a field for some years and then allowed it to lie fallow for some time and shifted to some other field. They grew several varieties of millets, pumpkins, watermelons and calabashes, a type of tobacco. At some places they grew beans and yams. Maize was introduced into South Africa during the 18th century.

After the men cleared the field, it was the task of the women to take over. Women did the hoeing, planting, weeding, harvesting and thrashing. Women also had to look after the young and the household chores as preparing the staple food and the cleaning of utensils, fetching water and firewood wherever necessary. The house built by men was plastered by women with cowdung and was also kept clean. Girls from an early age were supposed to help their mothers and in the process learn how to cook food and to work in the field. The work of the women was certainly more arduous and continuous than that of men. They were excluded from public affairs and were subordinate to men. Some women expressed their resentment against this state by running away from their husbands and other similar acts, which have been recorded in the 18th century.

15.4.3 The Bride Wealth

The bride-wealth was a unique institution in the South African Bantu speaking

society. A woman moved from her parental house to that of her in-laws after marriage. She was supposed to shoulder the responsibility of agricultural production, food preparation, up-keep of the house and giving birth and rearing up children. To compensate for this loss of source of labour and responsibility of procreation, the husband used to give a bride-wealth to the family of the wife. This normally used to be in the form of cattle. In case of divorce, (which may not have been very common), the bride-wealth was to be returned but only when the woman had begotten any child. Before she gave birth to a child, she was allowed to have milk at her house. But if she was unable to bear children, then she had a tougher life.

Possession of more cattle enhanced the ability to pay bride wealth and procure more (than one) wives which was the case with clan chiefs and other privileged elites. Bride's parents were willing to give their daughters to men of substance or the chiefs, so that they may get good bride-wealth. The chiefs, in their turn, used the labour of their many wives to give feasts and seal his authority (Collective feast were given to ensure elite status of the patron.) When the children reached puberty, they were initiated into adulthood. The initiation ceremonies were quite elaborate. The elderly exercised certain control over the young through this.

15.4.4 Organization of Government

The people south of Limpopo had distinct political institutions and identities. Most of the communities had 'kings' or chiefs. They had all the characteristics of kingdoms. The sizes of these kingdoms or 'principalities' (as Historian Elizabeth Isichei would prefer to call them), varied. Nguni principalities were dispersed and smaller, apparently because water was available in plenty and the types of pastures (the sweet and the sour veld) were found close to each other. The states of southern Sotho were also smaller and were largely on fertile river valleys as the Caledon. The chief settlement of the Thalping (southern Tswana), it was reported in 1801, was 'as large in circumference as the Cape Town'.

The chief of these clans/communities/states were supposed to bring in good rain, which would ensure good harvest. In case of a drought the authority of the chief was challenged and his people did desert him along with their cattle. Deserting the chief could also happen during a disputed succession. The office of the chief was mostly hereditary, yet a few could acquire chieftaindom by laying a claim to some chiefly lineage. Joining of new followers or desertions could make a clan small or big. About the fusion and fission of the units of polities Elizabeth Isichei says, "the conquest of a hero, the ambition of rival princely brothers" were some reason, "but it is likely that the underlying causes were often ecological, the pressure of a growing population and expanding herds on the resources." Amongst the Xhosa, it was mandatory for the brother and the son of the chief to leave the homestead of the father. There were Sotho-Tswana traditions describing the separation of two chiefly lineages from 1500 A.D. Inter-marriage between chiefly families was another reason of fusion of smaller polities into big ones. The cattle resources could help establish new chieftaincies. Some chieftaincies attracted groups of followers and had combined totem as the Rolong.

Generally speaking though, at least until the mid-eighteenth century, the

political units south of river Limpopo, were small, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga. In the Eastern Cape and on the high Veld, the principalities or kingdoms were large and had a hierarchy of confederate chiefs.

Towards the 16th century the arrival of the colonial powers changed the entire situation for the people of the southern part of Africa as in other regions of Africa.

15.5 SUMMARY

In this Unit you have had a glimpse of the history of Africa. Here we have not discussed each and every community and kingdom/State separately. We studied it in three sections covering a few regions of the North Africa, West Africa and South Africa. You must have also noticed that we did not select any one specific period to study all the three regions. One obvious reason for such a selection is the absence of detailed information about the whole of Africa in a chronological order for all its regions. Another reason for not going into details is the limitation of space available in this course (which plans to cover ancient and medieval societies in all regions of the world)

In North Africa the Egypt was the dominant civilization which dates back to more than 3000 years before the Christ. In Egypt the kingship was considered as divine which was also inherited. Yet dynastic changes were also regular. Religion played important role in the society. The script and writing were well developed and scribes were held in high esteem. The region was very fertile and yielded lots of surplus.

In West Africa we notice developed state system with established towns and cities. You were familiarized with some major monarchies of the region. Agriculture was the main occupation and generated sufficient surplus. A few crafts were also practised. The society was matrilineal.

The region of South Africa was inhabited by different communities. A few of these communities were fully pastoralists while some were involved in farming. In pastoral communities the ownership of cattle decided the social and political hierarchy. These communities were mainly patrilineal with women having a subordinate role. The colonization of Africa in the 19th century completely altered the economy, polity and society of various regions.

15.6 EXERCISES

- 1) What was bride-wealth and how did it control social relations?
- 2) Trade was the mainstay of the state formation in West Africa. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
- 3) Give a brief account of the nature of kingship and government in Egypt.
- 4) Discuss in brief the Economy of the region of South Africa.