NORTH OF THE LIMPO
AFRICA SINCE 1800

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Preface

North of the Limpopo: Africa since 1800 started out as a revision of Africa north of the Limpopo: The imperial experience since 1800, which first appeared in 1985 and which has enjoyed a measure of acceptance in a number of colleges and universities as an undergraduate textbook. Long before the authors embarked on the revision, it was clear that a number of structural changes would have to be made. The proliferation of works on Africa since the preparation of the original book in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including the multi-volumed Cambridge history of Africa and the Unesco General history of Africa as well as a myriad of monographs and research articles, made this a foregone conclusion. But the authors had further decided that the emphasis on 'the imperial experience' should be discarded. North of the Limpopo: Africa since 1800 reflects these changes.

Significant alterations have been effected at both ends of the time scale. The section on events before 1800 has been strengthened considerably, so much so that serious thought was given to the possibility of omitting the words 'since 1800' from the title. In the end it was decided not to do so, as the bulk of the work still deals with events after 1800. At the other end of the scale, North of the Limpopo does not end with the passing of the formal 'imperial' era, but goes beyond this to take in the situation in independent Africa after the withdrawal of the colonial powers.

The emphasis is no longer on the 'imperial experience', on European motives and experiences. In part 1 there is a fairly strong focus on the development of trade and trading relations in Africa, and throughout the book both authors have striven to achieve a balance between European activity and African initiatives and responses in Africa.

The new book also differs from the old one in that its approach is more thematical than chronological. However, bearing in mind that the majority of the students who will use the book do not have ready access to libraries and other works, it was not possible to take this too far. Thus while trying to draw certain threads together to form themes which will make the history of this vast continent over a period in excess of two centuries more intelligible, the authors were constantly aware of the need to provide sufficient detail to ensure that students could follow the chronological course of events as a backdrop to the study of the themes.
Part 1

To the end of the nineteenth century

Ken Smith
Africa after 1800 can hardly be comprehended without a close look at certain aspects of pre-nineteenth-century developments. And in these first two chapters this is what we are going to do. In chapter 1 we shall begin with a quick tour of some of the major geographical areas of the continent north of the Limpopo and sketch in early developments in the establishment of African societies. It is a rather breathless tour, full of names and movements, with one kingdom following another in quick succession and hundreds of years and several empires all being disposed of in double quick time, sometimes even within the space of a single sentence! This will, however, serve a useful purpose, and that is to make the point that African civilisations, or important events and processes in Africa, did not begin when Islam or Europe began making its presence felt. It concentrates on the development of trade in Africa and shows the close link between trade and the formation of states.

Still in chapter 1, this is followed by a section that points out that criteria for examining African societies should not differ from those we would apply in other societies. Here the point is made that Africans acted rationally, and that when they decided to plant a certain crop or not to use a particular device, these decisions were based on their appraisal of the value of such innovations. Where Africans could see an advantage in adopting new methods or implements they were not slow to do so.
The final section of chapter 1 deals with the development of African trading networks, and distinguishes between short-distance trade, long-distance trade and trade that was directed towards an external export market. It looks at the establishment of long-distance trade routes between West and North Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans on the west coast of Africa from the second half of the fifteenth century, and it also examines the impact of the European presence on this trans-Saharan trade. In all of the chapters of part 1 the influence of foreign trade on Africa features prominently. In chapter 1 the scene is set and Africa's internal trade and trade routes are examined as well as early foreign demand for African products. In chapter 2 the focus is placed on one particular aspect of that foreign demand – the market for slaves in the Americas. Foreign demand for slaves in East Africa and much of Central Africa peaked only after 1800, when the Atlantic trade was going into a slow and uneven decline, and will be dealt with separately in chapter 4.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRST AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Not only was Africa the cradle of civilisation but it also provided the first evidence for the existence of man. The very earliest evidence we have for the existence of the hominids who formed the blueprint for modern man, Homo sapiens sapiens, and the development of human society, comes from Africa. Dr Louis Leakey's excavations at Olduvai Gorge in northern Tanzania showed that hominids using crude stone tools were living in the area between 1 and 2 million years ago. The first humans lived very much in open country, where game was easier to hunt than in dense forests. Although Africa did not experience the Ice Ages that occurred in Europe, the presence of ice-caps to both the north and the south in the last Ice Age between 70 000 and 10 000 BC affected the balance between forest and savanna. The forests of Zaire and West Africa became less dense and tropical, and people began living in the forests as well as in the open grasslands. In the forests they began to make increasing use of wood. Another climatic change that began to occur from around 10 000 BC was that the Sahara, which had hitherto been mostly savanna, began drying out. By about 2000 BC the region had turned into the desert we know today.

At the same time as these changes were taking place, the long period of the Stone Age was coming to an end, to be replaced by the so-called Neolithic Revolution. This brought with it not only a more sophisticated range of tools, but also many cultural and technological changes resulting from the discoveries that it was not necessary to collect all of the food from the veld, that grains could be cultivated and that animals could be kept and bred. These discoveries meant that life became less nomadic and that settlements increased in size and became more permanent.

With the development of pastoralism, the older forms of economic activity – gathering, hunting and fishing – did not become redundant but were adapted. Very often they became part-time activities. Some foraging communities, however, continued their way of life long after knowledge of agriculture was widespread. The reason for this is that Africa's tropical grasslands were ideal for foraging. Perhaps that is why human beings evolved in East Africa. For a small population foraging is a fairly secure and leisured
way of life. The shift from foraging to domestication is usually taken to mean a move up the ladder of 'civilisation', but in sub-Saharan Africa this is not so much a movement towards a superior type of organisation as a reflection of the fact that the foraging systems that served humanity so well had degenerated. Why was it necessary to change a satisfactory way of life and go into the business of controlling food supplies? The answer lies in the changes to the physical environment: a general drying out, a decrease in the size and number of lakes. In the days of foraging aquatic societies could support a fairly dense population. Fishing is one form of hunting that provides for a large stationary population. When these lakes started to dry up, large populations could not be supported on foraging and hunting. So they had to go over to domestication and cultivation.

The Sahara desert, in modern times 2 700 km from north to south and close to 8 000 km from west to east, dominates the geography of the northern half of Africa. To the north of it lies the temperate Mediterranean coastland, and southwards are the tropics. It is a frontier racially as well as geographically. In the desert itself and to the north of it live the Berbers and the Arabs. They are fair-skinned people, of Caucasian origin, while to the south of the desert live the blacks, largely Bantu-speaking peoples.

Geographical zones in West Africa

Egypt and the Maghrib (an Arabic word that means 'the west'), which comprises modern Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, are part of the Mediterranean world. At its widest the lands of the Maghrib do not extend much more than 300 km inland before the desert takes over. The Maghrib is dominated by the Atlas chain of mountains, but much of the coastal area is very fertile, and therefore suitable for large-scale settlement. By virtue of their strategic position on the Mediterranean Sea and their abundance of good harbours, the countries of the Maghrib are well situated to control traffic on the
sea, and the history of the Maghrib is interwoven with the history of the struggle for control of the Mediterranean.

The lower Nile valley provided an ideal setting for the growth of a permanent civilisation. By at least 4000 BC agriculture and pastoralism had been established in Egypt and the Nile valley. Animal husbandry is at least as old as agriculture. About 5000 BC pastoralists in the Sahara kept long- and short-horned cattle, sheep and goats. The drying process in the Sahara affected both pastoralists and agriculturists. Cattle herders became nomadic, moving out of the Sahara for most of the year to find grazing and exchange animal products for grain. They would return to the desert with the onset of the rainy season in the savanna which brought with it fly-borne diseases. Agriculturists, unless they had access to land at oases, were forced out of the desert.

Those who moved south went into what is called the Sudan. This is the area between the Sahara desert and the northernmost limits of the tropical forest. The name comes from the Arabic *bilad al-Sudan*, meaning the ‘land of the black men’. In the Sudan, as in North Africa, the population increased as a result of immigration from the Sahara and the development of agriculture. In the Niger valley and the Lake Chad basin, as in Egypt and the Nile valley, conditions were favourable for the growth of larger populations because they afforded the right conditions for the development of agriculture, which throughout Africa was the main productive activity.

The people in the Sudan had to adapt their Saharan agricultural practices, because wheat and barley did not do well in the Sudan’s short growing season; further south these crops could not be cultivated at all as it was too wet. They therefore had to develop new crops from indigenous grasses, and in due course, some time between about 3000 and 1000 BC, millets evolved, including the sorghum species.

As far as tools are concerned, Africa went rapidly into an Iron Age, without going through the Bronze Age. Iron was in regular use in the Near East by about 1200 BC, and the Phoenicians brought this innovation to North Africa when they began to colonise it. But the large-scale manufacture of iron in Africa seems to have only followed the conquest of Egypt in the seventh century BC by the Assyrians. The techniques of iron smelting probably reached West Africa from North Africa across the Sahara. By about the fourth century AD iron-producing techniques were known throughout West Africa. Although African iron was good, Africa did not have an indigenous steel industry, so later people had to depend on foreign sources for sword blades and gun barrels. It does not seem as if iron had a dramatic impact on early African agriculture. Iron hoes are not much better than wooden ones for preparing the soil for cultivation in what are generally shallow systems. Iron probably had a greater impact on forest clearing, which was also affected by the fact that African smelters used charcoal, which meant large-scale destruction of forests.

With the exception of the land between modern Ghana and Nigeria, where there was a gap in the forest belt (which is often referred to as the ‘Benin gap’), to the south of the Sudan there was thick tropical forest that was very difficult to penetrate, and where the crops that thrived in the savanna could not be grown. Cereals tended to predominate
in the savanna, and roots in a large part of the forest. With the exception of yams, which were not so much a forest crop as one that grew on the fringes of the forest, there were no edible wild plants in the forest, and so initially the number of people who went to live in the forests was not as great as the number who lived in the savanna of the Sudan. Besides which the forests were singularly unattractive for cattle, as there was a lack of food on the one hand and an abundance of tsetse fly on the other. The people in the forests made use of the rivers, supplementing their diet with fishing. In time access was gained to the Congo (Zaire) basin, and by travelling along its tributaries migrants eventually came out into savanna lands like those in the Sudan, where they could grow their crops. There was a nuclear settlement in and around Katanga, from which the Bantu expansion to the southern half of the continent took place.

This was the base for the next major expansion movement, which went west and east along this woodland zone. To the west they came to the Atlantic coast just south of the mouth of the Congo River, and to the east the Indian Ocean east of Lake Nyasa (Malawi). By about the third century a north–south expansion movement took place in Uganda in the north and Zimbabwe in the south, and another north–south expansion movement along the eastern coast went towards southern Somalia in the north and the Zambezi mouth in the south.

This coastal expansion brought the Bantu-speaking peoples into contact with Indian Ocean trade and Southeast Asian foodcrops. At the same time African crops were introduced to other continents. Africa had indigenous staples of millet, sorghum, yam and rice. African sorghums became a major South Asian food crop in the first millennium BC; after 1500 African yams took over from indigenous yams in most of the tropical New World. From an examination of botanical evidence it seems likely that many crops, including bananas, new varieties of cocoyam (taro) and rice, coconuts and sugar, came to Africa from Southeast Asia via the island of Madagascar between about 300 and 800 AD. The banana was the most important of these as it became the main staple of various East and East Central African communities. The arrival of the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century brought other crops such as maize (American corn), manioc (cassava), groundnuts, tobacco and a variety of fruits. Some of these were introduced directly from Brazil, others came via Iberia. Cassava was introduced in the sixteenth century, but it did not spread rapidly until the latter part of the eighteenth century, when people learned how to remove the prussic acid that some varieties contained. Cassava was drought resistant, could be grown in poor soil and required less labour than almost any other crop. It had a high calorie level, but was a low-protein starch. Until colonial times it was not so important or dominant. But it had one advantage in long-distance trading zones – its grains could easily be dried and carried, to be used as food for caravan porters, or for the crews and cargoes of slaving ships.

Some crops spread more rapidly than others. For example, Columbus brought knowledge of maize from the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century. Within 50 years of his voyage, maize had reached modern Nigeria by a route that went from the Mediterranean to Egypt, across the Sahara to Senegambia and then to modern Nigeria. The introduction of these crops not only accelerated the growth of agricultural com-
munities, but also later helped the Bantu to occupy fully the forests of the Congo basin, northwes of the Katanga nucleus, and also the West African forests which had initially been sparsely populated, for these new crops then spread northwards towards the Sudan.

The Bantu pioneers would not have taken cattle with them through the forests. They obtained these from the inhabitants they found living in the area. In Central and southern Africa they obtained cattle from the Khoisan peoples.

**NORTH AFRICA**

**Role of foreign trade**

Trade played an important role in the formation of civilisations and kingdoms in Africa. The earliest civilisation to be established in Africa was in Egypt, which was extremely fertile because of the annual flooding of the Nile. It was also situated at the crossroads between Africa and Asia, and where the Mediterranean world met that of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Egyptian civilisation reached its peak about 2400 BC. Although Egypt was ideal for agriculture and became the granary of much of the ancient world, it had little stone, timber or metals, and the Egyptians had to rely heavily on foreign trade. Boats made of papyrus reeds could travel southwards along the Nile to what was called Nubia, and both Egyptian trading and raiding began here about 2500 BC. But because they lacked supplies of timber, the Egyptians did not build ships that could sail on the Mediterranean or Red Sea, with the result that much of their foreign trade from these quarters was carried in the ships of other nations.

**Egypt**

Egypt was subdued by numerous conquerors. Nubia, originally colonised by Egyptians, in turn invaded and conquered the Land of the Pyramids, and held it until the Assyrians overran Egypt in 671–666 BC. Towards the end of the seventh century BC, Greek immigrants began to establish agricultural settlements in Cyrenaica’s fertile valleys. At the same time a colony of Greek traders set themselves up near the Rosetta mouth of the Nile, coming to dominate much of Egypt’s commercial life and trading relations. This influence culminated in the conquest of Egypt by Alexander of Macedon in 332 BC. When Alexander’s empire fell apart after his death in 323 BC, one of Alexander’s generals, Ptolemy, established a new dynasty that ruled for close on three hundred years. He moved the capital to Alexandria on the Mediterranean. Alexandria soon became the greatest of all Greek cities. Not only did Judaism become established here, but it also became a major centre of Christianity. The Greeks in time gave way to Roman conquerors. The Romans were drawn to Africa by the agricultural wealth of Egypt and its access to Asian and Indian Ocean trade. In 30 BC Egypt became a formal Roman province.

**Kush and Meroe**

Nubia had been colonised by Egypt at an early date, but in the eleventh century BC, when civil disturbances wracked Egypt, Nubia took the opportunity of establishing itself as the independent kingdom of Kush. After the Assyrian rise to ascendancy in Egypt, the centre of gravity of Kush moved southwards, resulting in the founding of a new capital of Meroe in the south. In times of trouble with Egypt, when Kush’s trade along the Nile declined, its trade with the Red Sea area expanded. Meroe was linked to
Zeila on the coast. Meroë's power was based on its iron industry, the wealth of its foreign trade and its strong agricultural base. Between 200 and 300 AD, Meroë's fertile agricultural land declined. The most probable reason for this is that the charcoal-hungry iron-smelting process resulted in too many trees being felled, with a consequent increase in soil erosion and loss of topsoil. Meroë’s trade connections with Roman Egypt via the Nile and along the Red Sea brought it great profits as the Romans were buyers of Meroë luxury goods such as gold, ostrich feathers, ebony and ivory, and leopard skins. The decline of the Roman Empire meant that there was less demand for these articles. Besides these adverse circumstances, the rising Axum empire to the southeast of Meroë and closer to the coast deprived Meroë of much of its trade with the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. By the time that Axum invaded Meroë in 350 AD the Meroë kingdom was in an advanced state of disintegration.

The origins of Axum are to be found among the Semitic inhabitants of southwestern Arabia (in and around the modern Yemen) who built up a flourishing agricultural civilisation which was expanding to Africa by the seventh century BC. Traders in search of incense, spices and ivory were followed by farmers. Behind the arid western coastlands, in the highlands of modern Ethiopia and Eritrea, they planted their crops and
engage in the ivory, gold and gum trades. By the first century AD these colonists had mixed with the local people and had established the kingdom of Axum in the highlands of Ethiopia, with its capital near the Eritrean border. It evolved a language and writing of its own. By the third century it was so powerful that for a period it extended its rule into the Yemen across the Red Sea. Axum was at the height of its power in the fourth century under King Ezana (c. 320–350 AD), who was also the first king to become a Christian. Towards the end of the fifth century, Monophysite monks reached Axum. They were very successful, and Christianity became an important factor in the national life of the people. This was the root of the Ethiopian Church. Fage writes that: ‘The kingdom withdrew into the interior highlands, absorbed more and more essentially African peoples, and so, while remaining steadfastly if idiosyncratically Christian, transformed itself from the Graeco-Semitic kingdom of Axum into the African kingdom of Ethiopia which lasted into the twentieth century.’1

As in the case of Meroe, a combination of factors was responsible for the decline of Axum in the eighth century. In the first place it lost much of its trade in the wake of the expansion of Islam into North Africa, for the Persian Gulf rather than the Red Sea now cornered most of the trade between the Indian Ocean and the eastern Mediterranean. It is likely that its decline was also partly due to a deterioration in the natural environment.

North Africa also became subject to the Phoenicians, known to us through the Bible as the Canaanites, who hailed from the coast of Syria and Lebanon. Best known as the inventors of the alphabet which we use today, by the eighth century BC they were becoming entrenched in three areas in particular: Tunisia, Tripolitania, and the northern Atlantic coast of Morocco. Tunisia, which had the biggest single stretch of fertile coastland in the whole of northwestern Africa, was well situated vis-à-vis Sicily, where the Phoenicians were competing fiercely against the Greeks in trade. The Tunisian colonies flourished and by the sixth century the biggest of them, Carthage, asserted its independence and its control over all the other settlements in Africa and the western Mediterranean.

The trade routes that led from the Phoenician footholds on the North African coast across the western Sahara towards the western Sudan were firmly in the hands of nomadic Berber pastoralists, so that the influence of Carthage was limited to the settled agricultural areas of North Africa. During the heyday of Carthage the Punic language became the trade language of northwest Africa, while the introduction of Semitic cultural influences paved the way for the later introduction of Judaism, Christianity and Islam into the region. The permanent legacy of Carthage, however, was not substantial.

Between 264 and 146 BC the Romans were engaged in an almost continuous struggle with Carthage, in what are known as the Punic Wars. Even after the Romans made themselves masters of Sicily in 201 BC they could not rest peacefully while Carthage remained strong, and the wars were finally ended only with the total destruction of Carthage in 146 BC.
Eventually the Romans occupied virtually all the agricultural land from Egypt to Morocco. But the borders of their African provinces were continually raided by the tribes of the interior. Soldiers were sent to guard the military frontier, the limes. A combination of these soldiers and immigrant farmers gave rise to a new Romano-Berber population. This stabilised population made North Africa an integral part of the Roman empire, detached in many ways from the rest of the African continent. It was far more firmly attached to the Mediterranean than it was to Africa.

The impact of the Roman empire on Africa beyond the limes was very small, and although trade goods came from the south, this trade was in the hands of desert dwellers. In fact, in their attempts to ease defence of the borders it seems as if the Romans aggravated the situation. The camel, which had reached Egypt via Asia, was seen by the Romans as an ideal animal for soldiers guarding the frontier. But it soon became apparent that it was even more suitable for desert raiders.

By the fifth century the Roman empire was crumbling everywhere. The influence of the Mediterranean world on Africa was in decline. But it left behind the culture and religion of Christianity. One of the most significant legacies of the Greek, Roman and Phoenician interludes in Africa was in the sphere of religion. Alexandria was a major intellectual centre, from which religious influences radiated. Athanasius (c. 296-373), the father of modern Christian doctrine, came from Alexandria. Arius, his opponent, who propagated the Arian heresy, was born in Libya. Judaism also came to North Africa in these years, which is perhaps not surprising when one considers the close links that existed between Phoenicia and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. By Roman times there were fairly large Jewish communities in Egypt and other places in North Africa, not only in the towns but also further inland.

Christianity had spread in Africa before Constantine’s conversion, but it probably entrenched itself even further after it became the official religion of the Roman empire. What is interesting about Christianity in Africa was the tendency for sects to develop, a process which started in the first few centuries of the Christian era in North Africa. In Egypt the Coptic Church developed, based on the Monophysite view of the nature of Christ, which had been declared heretical by the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

It was less than seven years after the death of the prophet Mohammed that the Arabs spilled over into Africa and attacked Egypt in 639. By 642 Egypt had been overwhelmed and Christianity survived only as the religion of some of the poorer people of the country. Spirited Nubian resistance contained the Arabs in their southward push and the advance of Islam in this direction was halted. Ethiopia, isolated by mountains, survived as a Christian kingdom. From Egypt the Arabs moved along the North African coast, initially meeting with fierce resistance from the local Hamitic-speaking Berber tribes. It was not long, however, before they began to embrace Islam, which acted as a unifying force and helped to give a measure of unity to the Maghrib that it had not enjoyed previously because of the deep divisions between the various Berber tribes, particularly between the more settled and cosmopolitan Berbers of the coastal plains and the largely nomadic tribesmen of the mountains.
Early in the eighth century the whole of the Maghrib was in Arab hands. The Muslim drive did not stop here, however, and in 711 the battle was taken to Europe when the mixed Berber and Arab legions of Islam invaded the Iberian peninsula. It was only in 732 that Charles Martel stopped them at Tours, and the Muslim advance came to an end. But it was to be close on seven hundred years before the Europeans gained the initiative and drove the Muslims from the peninsula and carried their counter-offensive into North Africa.

For the most part the Arabs who had hitherto come to Africa had been a small urban upper-class group, educated and sophisticated, speaking the classical Arabic of the Koran. But from the middle of the eleventh century Arab Bedouin tribes swept across the Maghrib. It is estimated that within a few years about 200,000 of these Bedouin herdsmen had descended on the Maghrib as conquerors and colonisers. This was a watershed in the history of the Maghrib as the Berbers of the mountains and the desert came into contact with the Bedouin and, like the Berbers of the coastal plains, accepted Arab culture, although on a much lower level than the classical language and culture of the towns.

Europe remained on the defensive against the triumphant forces of Islam until the fifteenth century when Portugal and Spain drove the Muslims, now called Moors, from the Iberian peninsula. In 1415 the Portuguese carried the fight to the Moors in North Africa, capturing the Moroccan port of Ceuta. In 1497 Spain took Melilla on the North African coast from the Moors, and in the course of the first part of the sixteenth century Spain and Portugal captured most of the ports of the Maghrib. But as Muslim reaction to the European conquests mounted, the Ottoman Turks stepped in to put an end to the European expansion. In the fifteenth century the Ottomans had built up a powerful Muslim state in the Mediterranean, and in 1517 Egypt became part of their empire; Ottoman influence also spread down the Red Sea coasts. Turkish naval power drove the Spaniards from the eastern and central Maghrib and Turkish colonies were established in Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, so that by 1590 the Turks had virtually driven the Spanish from North Africa. By 1800 the whole of North Africa, with the exception of Morocco, had become part of the Ottoman empire.

All of the new possessions of the Ottomans owed allegiance to the sultan in Istanbul (Constantinople). But it was a huge, widespread empire, and the Ottomans lacked the resources or the will to make their rule effective. For the most part their government did not fall heavily on their subjects. In Africa they appointed local sultans who governed without much reference to Istanbul. So long as they acknowledged Ottoman suzerainty and sent the appropriate tribute to the Porte, they were for the most part left to their own devices. The Ottoman empire went into a slow but steady decline, but by 1800 it still held all its North African possessions with the exception of Egypt, which was occupied by Napoleon in 1798 as part of his grand plan for severing Britain’s lifeline with India. When the French withdrew after a brief occupation, the country reverted to Ottoman control.
Piracy

North African coastal towns conducted trade with Europe, and pirates operating from Maghrib ports preyed on European shipping in the Mediterranean. In the eighteenth century the prosperity of Algiers rested firmly on the activity of its corsairs. European retaliation, which included the bombardment of Algiers, and more adequate protection of ships helped reduce but did not stamp out piracy. Other places that did well out of piracy were Tunisia, and Tripolitania, for whom piracy was the largest source of income in the last part of the eighteenth century.

WEST AFRICA

The Sudan

Geographical features

North to south the width of the Sudan has varied over the ages. In the north the desert tends to make inroads into the Sudan whereas in the south the clearing of forest areas has tended to increase the Sudan in that direction. The Sudan is divided into the western Sudan and eastern Sudan, with Lake Chad as the dividing line. Sometimes we speak of the central Sudan by which we mean the Sudan of northern Nigeria and Chad. (The use of the word 'Sudan' is not to be confused with the Sudan Republic in northeast Africa, south of Egypt, which is really part of the geographical area of the eastern Sudan.)

In this chapter at least, the western Sudan, which extends from Senegal to Lake Chad, a distance of well over 3,000 km, is the most important for our purposes. It is about 1,000 km wide and consists of a belt of undulating grassland studded with trees. To the south of it is the tropical forest belt, running from west to east, but even at its widest, not more than 300 km from north to south. These main vegetation zones have been there since about 300 BC, and are the result of a drying-out process which began some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago and which also saw the formation of the Sahara desert.

Trans-Saharan trade

Although the Sahara desert has always been something of a barrier to the large-scale movement of people, it has not been a bar to trade. Early in the Christian era the camel was introduced to the region and a number of trans-Saharan trade routes developed. By the beginning of the ninth century there was regular trade across the Sahara. Trade played a decisive role in the formation of states. It would seem that political growth in West Africa spread from north to south, from the Sahel, the southern shore of the Sahara, deeper into the Sudan and from the Sudan into Guinea. For centuries the agriculturists of the Sahel must have been subject to raids, infiltration and settlement by the nomadic pastoralists from the desert. Constant raiding would tend to make the agriculturists join up into larger and more easily defensible settlements. Villages would grow into fortified towns, which would in turn become larger, requiring all sorts of sociopolitical changes. The arrival of newcomers from the desert facilitated the development of larger political entities through the introduction of horses, which gave rulers greater power over remote areas. With the cavalry and the discipline needed to survive in a harsh desert, they were better organised than the agricultural people they attacked and they came to be the dominant factor.

Ancient Ghana

It was this military interaction that spurred the formation of centralised states, of which ancient Ghana was the prime example. (The ancient kingdom of Ghana should not be
confused with modern Ghana which is much further to the south and east. Ancient Ghana was to the north of the upper Niger and Senegal valleys, dominating the southern parts of modern Mauritania and Mali. Speakers of the Soninke language, a division of Mande, formed the largest group in ancient Ghana.)

An important aspect of the origins of states in many parts of Africa is control over trade. A large centralised state provided security and promoted exchange instead of raiding. This is particularly true of Ghana. It would seem that one of the main reasons why a large kingdom should have developed here was to monopolise or control trade between the Sudan on the one hand and the Sahara and Mediterranean coastlands of North Africa on the other. It seems likely that as early as the tenth century there was a sophisticated trade in gold and salt. The fact that Ghana was situated in arid southern Mauritania and Mali, rather than in more congenial circumstances further south, indicates that its aim was to control the gold from Bambuk on the upper Senegal River and from Bure, further south on the upper Niger. One of the most important economic activities of Ghana was to collect this gold from the south and to exchange it for Saharan salt and North African manufactures brought by Tuareg tribesmen of the western desert.

Salt

Salt was a major item of trade in West Africa. In this part of the continent much of the salt came from the Sahara desert where there were good rock-salt resources. The western Sudan obtained its salt supplies from a number of areas in or close to the Sahara. Salt is a biological requirement, a necessary dietary supplement for those who live in a tropical climate, who eat mainly cereals and have a low consumption of meat and fish. This sort of situation applies to much of West Africa, and in particular to parts of the western Sudan. In tenth-century Gao, the capital of Songhai, salt was such a rare commodity that its safe-keeping was a royal prerogative. Salt was so sought after that it was often exchanged weight for weight with gold.

Control over trade

This trade was subject to organised royal control and taxation. The rulers of Ghana tried to ensure that all valuable exports from the western Sudan passed through their hands and that they had control over the distribution of Saharan and North African goods in the Sudan. The trade in gold became virtually a state monopoly. Wealth became very much concentrated in the hands of the ruling classes. The more powerful the state the more it could obtain by way of tribute and tribute gave the rulers surplus goods with which to trade.

The Almoravids

Operation of the caravan routes was in the hands of the Saharan Berber tribes but, as the power of the Ghana kings increased, they showed signs of wanting to extend control northwards at the expense of these desert carriers. Although Ghana made serious inroads into the routes of the Sanhaja, the latter in the eleventh century came under the sway of a rigid puritanical form of Islam and were transformed into a military federation known as the Almoravids. In the middle of the eleventh century the Almoravids conquered the agriculturists on both sides of the desert. Ghana itself was conquered, probably in 1076. The Almoravids had even greater successes in Northwest Africa and the Iberian peninsula.
The Almoravids, however, did not bring stability. They neglected agriculture, were always quarrelling among themselves, and by the end of the eleventh century the former Soninke (northern Mande) rulers had regained control of the kingdom. But the Almoravids had caused damage that could not be repaired. Trans-Saharan traders were now using more central routes leading to the Niger bend, avoiding the western routes through the disturbed western Sahara, with the result that Ghana did not regain its former glory.

**Mali**

Mande groups in the south, who lived closer to the Niger, whose agriculture had not been disrupted, and who had more direct control over the alluvial gold deposits, began to break away from Ghana, eventually inheriting the mantle of Ghana and founding the Mande empire of Mali. The new southern termini of the trans-Saharan trade were now
Timbuktu and Gao, and the Mali empire tried to control the whole of the Sudan as far as the Niger bend, where these termini were situated. So the Niger was the focal point of this empire. But navigation of the river downstream from modern Segu was in the hands of the Songhai, a non-Mande people. The Mali empire extended its control to the Songhai and retained it until the beginning of the fifteenth century.

In the fourteenth century Mali was characterised by its orderliness and good government. But in the second half of the fourteenth century, when Mande central power was weakened by faction fights among the royal family, the Songhai took the opportunity of asserting their independence. The military power of Mali was destroyed over a long period of campaigning. Songhai became a major empire, dominating the trade from the
western Sudan destined for the Sahara, and likewise receiving goods that came across the desert for distribution in the Sudan.

The Songhai empire collapsed in 1591 as the result of a Moroccan expedition which crossed the desert to Gao and Timbuktu in 1590–1591. The easy victory may be explained by the fact that from 1528 to 1590 there was a fierce struggle between two political groups in the empire, so that by 1591 the empire had become very much weakened from within. The long-term objective of the Moroccan sultan al-Mansur in launching the attack was to establish direct control over Sudanic gold resources and so outflank Europe. The plan failed, but it did destroy the Songhai empire, leaving in its place a number of smaller, competing and internally unstable political entities. This disorder hindered long-distance trade. It has also been blamed for severe famine and disease in the western Sudan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
This was the end of the plan conceived by ancient Ghana of a single major power controlling tribute and trade from the entire western Sudan. After the fall of Songhai, trade routes moved even further east to Kanem and Hausaland.

Kanem

Besides this Ghana/Mali/Songhai axis of large states, there was another large centralised state in the central Sudan named Kanem. The Kanem monarchy of the Saifawa dynasty was north and northeast of Lake Chad. Kanem did not have access to the same amount of gold as Ghana, so its economic base was not quite so specific. By the start of the thirteenth century, Kanem controlled territory around Lake Chad to the south, and to the north its power extended to the important salt deposits at Bilma and the oasis of Djado. But three centuries of internecine strife among factions of the ruling Saifawa group weakened the empire, and the mai eventually withdrew from Kanem and re-established their kingdom in the province of Borno, southwest of Lake Chad in modern northern Nigeria. This kingdom became increasingly powerful in the sixteenth century.

Islam

Trans-Saharan trade brought contact with Islam. The influence of Islam had preceded the conquest of Ghana, but the defeat brought Islam to the heart of Ghana. It was not long before Islam came to the small Hausa kingdoms. The conversion of the mai, the rulers of Kanem, to Islam around the end of the eleventh century shows the importance of trans-Saharan trade in that part of the Sudan. By the eleventh century the Muslim trade with the Sudan had revolutionised trading patterns and at the same time given a tremendous fillip to indigenous African cultures. It brought a written language and literate officials to West Africa.

Islam generally became the religion of the rulers, the traders and the scholars of the principal cities. But the rural population remained tied to its traditional laws and customs. It should be noted that whereas North Africa became a part of the world of Islam both historically and culturally, the western Sudan did not. It was on the outer edge of the Muslim world, and black culture, although greatly changed and modified through contact with Islam, remained basically intact. At this stage Islam was confined to the ruling and merchant classes. The Muslims who entered the Sudan were literate and with experience of a wider world, and they were sought after by rulers who used them in high administrative positions and often became Muslims themselves. West African traders readily adopted Islam. It provided a framework of trust and credit for the conduct of business. This was important where business transactions and credit depended on affiliations and personal trust.

Guinea

Guinea comprises mainly the forest area to the south of the Sudan. Although the political and commercial system built up by the Mande, as exemplified in the Ghana and Mali kingdoms, and even in Songhai to some extent, did have an influence in Guinea, there was no military intervention and political domination. One of the main reasons for this was that the military superiority of the western Sudanic kingdoms depended very much on their monopoly of cavalry, which was difficult to use in
woodland savanna and could not be used at all in the forest zone, although the ‘Benin gap’ in the forest belt was more open to northern influences.

Mande initiatives had more effect in the lands immediately to the west and south of the Mande heartland, in the vicinity of the upper reaches of the Niger and Senegal rivers, which was occupied by people such as the Tukolor, Wolof, Serer and Dyula. The disruption accompanying the Mande process of state formation in the western Sudan caused Mande-speaking refugees to move west and south, either as traders or conquerors. What Mande traders wanted from the south and southeast was gold which could be obtained from the valley of the Black Volta and in many places in the forests of the southern Ivory Coast and modern Ghana.

They also wanted kola nuts, the most popular type of which was cola nitida which grew wild in the tropical forests from Liberia to modern Ghana. Containing caffeine, kola nuts are a mild stimulant and were thus in demand because Muslim law prohibited the consumption of alcohol. When chewed, the refreshing flavour helped to combat tiredness and thirst.

Other kingdoms of note were the Nupe kingdom, north of the Niger–Benue confluence, the Igalad kingdom to the south of Nupe, the Yoruba kingdoms which lay to the south of Borgu and southwest of Nupe, the Benin kingdom which was east of the Yoruba, and the Aja kingdom, which was to the west of Benin. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Oyo was the dominant Yoruba state. Evidence suggests that the Benin and Yoruba kingdoms were created by bands of immigrants from the north and northeast. The success of the immigrants may have been due to their possession of cavalry. The Oyo armies, which in the seventeenth century extended Oyo power vigorously south-westwards, were based on cavalry. Early Oyo history suggests a continual jostling for power with the savanna kingdoms of Borgu and Nupe. The newcomers may also have been town builders. Major towns had walls around them, very reminiscent of the walls of Kano and Katsina.

During the slave trade era, the Niger delta was to feature prominently in trading relations. It was one of the areas that came into prominence as a result of its trade with Europe. But there was also vigorous trade in the region before the arrival of Europeans. The people of the Niger delta and from the creeks as far as Cameroon were sending salt and dried fish to the north, obtaining agricultural produce in exchange. There was also an east–west trade as far as southern Yorubaland.

**A European presence on the west coast**

In the fifteenth century Portugal took the lead in Europe’s return to Africa. From their base at Ceuta the Portuguese were able to obtain firsthand information about the trans-Saharan caravan routes of West Africa. Because of their long tradition of seafaring, the Portuguese had retained their interest in further exploration. Prince Henry of Portugal, called Henry the Navigator, established a school for navigation at Sagres and encouraged exploration of the African coastline. His motives were a mixture of idealism and practical considerations. On the practical side he wanted to see how far the power
and authority of the Moors extended, to find out whether it would be possible to outflank them; he hoped to contact the legendary Prester John, supposedly a Christian king, and to make common cause with him against the Muslims. Also, on a very practical level, he wanted to tap the gold resources of West Africa. On the idealistic side there was a desire to convert the heathen.

These were Henry’s motives, but in broader terms for some time European countries had been giving thought to finding their own way to the East, to India. The Crusaders in their struggle against Islam had come into contact with the products of the Byzantine and Islamic worlds, and Europe had quickly developed a taste for what the Far East had to offer. Genoa and Venice became great centres of trade as the fabulous products of India were funnelled through these two ports via Muslim middlemen. This trade was seriously disrupted when Istanbul and large areas of the Black Sea, Asia Minor and North Africa came into Ottoman hands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, closing the overland routes to the Far East, and rendering voyages to the Near East dangerous and unattractive. So there was an incentive for European nations to visit the East themselves.

By the time that Henry died in 1460 Portuguese ships had gone as far south as Sierra Leone and had discovered and colonised the Cape Verde Islands, the value of which as a base for exploitation of the mainland was quickly appreciated. Others continued with Henry’s work, and in 1487 Bartholomew Diaz became the first European sailor in modern times to sail around the Cape; on 1 March 1498 Vasco da Gama sailed into the harbour of Mozambique and reached Calicut in India in May 1498. The Portuguese had found their way to the East.

Stages in Atlantic trade

Although a variety of articles had been traded in Africa before the slave trade came to dominate markets, and continued to be traded throughout the period of the slave trade, in general terms one can say that the Atlantic trade went through a number of stages in each of which there was a single dominant item. The first was gold. Europe’s first trading contacts with the West African coast were made in the hope of finding gold. The most important of the west coast stations were on the Gold Coast, the central one of which was Elmina (meaning literally ‘the mine’). This was established in 1482. Portuguese settlement of the islands of the Gulf of Guinea began about 1484. These were Fernando Po, Principe and São Tomé.

The Dutch

By the second half of the sixteenth century other European nations were challenging Portugal’s dominant position. In the Eighty Years’ War, the closing of Portuguese and Spanish ports to the Dutch by Philip II of Spain struck a mortal blow at the Dutch economy as the Dutch had become the great carriers of Europe, their ships collecting the spices brought by Portuguese ships from the East and then distributing these throughout Europe. The Dutch were now forced to pioneer their own way to the East. By the end of the sixteenth century they had done so, and by 1610 the superior Dutch fleets had smashed Portuguese power in the East and laid the basis for the establishment of a Dutch colonial empire. In 1621 the Dutch West India Company was established; in the later 1630s it captured large parts of Brazil. In their search for labour
for their South American possessions the Dutch concentrated on obtaining slaves from the Gold Coast where they set up forts and stations, taking Elmina from the Portuguese in 1637. The French too showed an interest in the west coast and by the middle of the sixteenth century there was a strong French presence on the coast between the Senegal and Gambia rivers.

Along the Gambia Britain occupied St James in 1618. There was great competition between the Netherlands, France and Britain on the Gold Coast. Between 1662 and 1713 the Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading to Africa and its successor, the Royal African Company, established posts in the Gold Coast, Gambia and Sierra Leone. Brandenburg (later Prussia), Sweden and Denmark all had posts on the west coast for brief periods of the seventeenth century.

The posts which the Europeans established were fortified because of the gold trade and not because of the slave trade. European trading posts were rarely fortified unless they traded in gold, and were designed for defence against European rivals, not Africans. Gold could easily be carried off by pirates or others, but slaves could not. By the eighteenth century there were some two dozen or so major stone forts on the Gold Coast; a number of the forts were in the ‘Benin gap’ where the savanna interrupted the forest and swept down to the sea, which meant healthier conditions for foreigners in the tropics.

The desire for gold even explains the entry of Europeans into other markets. The capture or purchase of slaves was often undertaken to facilitate the trade in gold. Professor Fage says that the early Portuguese were not innovators of trade and had very little of their own to offer that would interest African buyers. So they simply serviced existing local trading patterns. At first they obtained cloth in Morocco and exchanged this for gold on the Gold Coast. They later obtained trading goods from closer at hand in Benin which, though not a great producer itself, had a well-organised trading system with easy access to the sea. They obtained beads, cloth and slaves in the Bight of Benin, exchanging these for gold on the Gold Coast. One of the main Portuguese imports to Benin was brassware. Early Portuguese entry into Angola was linked to the desire for slaves to send to the Gold Coast where they could be sold in exchange for gold, and also to the hope that Angola would have gold. Sometimes other European traders also used their ships to expand and take over existing African markets, or to create new markets in Africa for existing trade products. Like the Portuguese, the Dutch took beads and cloth from Benin, trading these for gold on the Gold Coast. Europeans obtained African-woven textiles from the Ijebu, Benin and the Ivory Coast, and sold them on the Gold Coast. The export of West African gold via the Atlantic reached a peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After that it decreased sharply.

But of course not all early European activity was linked to the search for gold. Besides gold and slaves, ivory from the Ivory Coast and dye-woods and hardwoods from the forests were also traded. St Louis (at the mouth of the Senegal River) and Gorée were the main French possessions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. St Louis was close to the Mauritanian forests and appropriated much of the gum from the forests.
South of a line from Cameroon to the Kenya–Somalia border was the country of Bantu-speaking peoples. As in West Africa, the settlement pattern of this part of Africa was very much conditioned by geographical factors. The first nucleus of expansion shortly before the Christian era was between Lake Tanganyika and the upper waters of the Kasai (that is Katanga) where migrants found the same type of woodland savanna as they had known in West Africa. Conditions here were favourable for the emergence of large kingdoms – it had the right amount of rainfall for farming, it was rich in minerals, and iron- and copper-working were well advanced. The largest state in this vicinity was the Luba kingdom of northern Katanga.

By the end of the fifteenth century there were a number of large kingdoms in Central Africa. There was the Kongo kingdom of the Bakonga south of the Congo (Zaire) River which dominated about 250 km of coastline. In this kingdom, which was at the height of its power at the end of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese were active in the southern savannas south of the equatorial forest. Their involvement differed from that in the rest of West Africa. Initially trade was not so important, and King John II of Portugal hoped to make contact with Prester John through the Kongo. The Portuguese tried to establish good relations with the densely populated kingdom, sending teachers and missionaries there. This was the first time that Europe had attempted to make meaningful contact with an indigenous African society, and some of its rulers accepted Christianity and were baptised. In this area the Portuguese penetrated into the interior for about 160 km. But the results of their contact with Kongo were disappointing. They did not have gold, and they were also very remote from the Indian Ocean trading system. So the Portuguese took slaves from the area. The Portuguese did not spread craft techniques to the region but they did give the rulers a taste for the imported manufactures of Europe. The ruling class became very dependent upon imported manufactured articles which could be paid for only through the sale of gathered natural products or slaves. In this sense contact with Portugal led to the underdevelopment of the Kongo.

It used to be thought that Portuguese interference in the domestic affairs of Kongo and their quest for slaves fatally undermined the kingdom and destroyed it. More recent research indicates, however, that the slave-gathering activities were not so disruptive to Kongo society itself, that the slaves were mostly obtained from outside the kingdom. In fact, the Kongo kingdom continued as a stable entity for some 200 years after its first contact with the Portuguese, and it broke up late in the seventeenth century as a result of internal dissension.

In the latter part of the sixteenth century, two other groups appeared on the borders of the Kongo kingdom. One of these, the Jaga, were soldier adventurers who came originally from the Luba region, and who made frequent surprise attacks on neighbours, incorporating them into their organisation. Their activities resulted in the creation of a number of small military kingdoms about 150 to 300 km inland. The other
group was the Imbangala, more of Lunda than Luba origin, who set up the kingdom of Kasanje to the southeast of the Bakongo.

In the seventeenth century a member of the ruling Luba dynasty founded a large empire among the Lunda to the west. This was the kingdom of the Mwato Yamvo in the southwest corner of modern Zaire. To the southeast of them, astride the Luapula River in southern Katanga, was the Mwato Kazembe, originally founded by one of the Lunda chiefs. By the end of the eighteenth century the Kazembe kingdom, which was still expanding, was the strongest of the Lunda-Luba states. These states were to play a major role in the ivory trade in the nineteenth century and were also important links in the growing Portuguese trading network.

Portuguese pombeiros (trading agents) went into the interior from Luanda and made contact with the Mwato Yamvo, creating a demand for European goods, thus bringing the interior into the international trading economy. Initially these pombeiros were Portuguese traders, but it was not long before most pombeiros were half-castes or African slaves. Both the Mwato Yamvo and the Mwato Kazembe played an important role in the developing trans-continental trade route from Angola to Mozambique and other East African ports, and their strategic position athwart this route, the flow of European products, and their ability to play a part in satisfying the needs of the Europeans, brought them a new prosperity and strength that they would otherwise not have attained.

East Africa differs from West Africa because of its low density of population and also because of the different pattern of population distribution. The interior in the vicinity of the Great Lakes is more densely populated. Along the coast there is also greater density. But between these areas it was very sparsely populated. Only around the Zambezi valley was there a continuous belt of heavy population linking coast and interior. One of the main reasons for this is that about 80 to 120 km inland the environment changes from that of a mixed forest and savanna watered by the monsoon rains to a region of uninviting thorn scrub. There was also an ethnic boundary between the coastal Bantu agricultural people and the semi-nomadic pastoralists of the interior. Unlike West Africa, cattle were spread throughout the East African interior. As in West Africa, salt and copper provided the basis for long-distance trade, but in East Africa these commodities were located in densely populated areas, so there was less incentive to long-distance trade.

The period from 1500 to 1800 was marked by considerable population shifts throughout the region. Although directly behind the coastal zone the interior was sparsely inhabited, further inland, in the centre of the subcontinent, the population attained a high density. The most densely populated and advanced part of Bantu Africa was the region between Lakes Victoria, Albert and Edward, and the Katanga region. The lands north and west of Lake Victoria were dominated by Bunyoro, Buganda, Ankole, Karagwe, Ruanda and Urundi. The heart of Buganda was on the fertile plains northwest of Lake Victoria. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Baganda extended their auth-
Nyangwezi

There was a fairly well-organised trading system between these states. Although at first the presence of the warlike Masai blocked the road from the lakes to the east, in the eighteenth century contact between the coast and the lakes started to increase as trade came into the hands of the Nyamwezi (people of the moon), who lived east of Lake Tanganyika, in the west of modern Tanzania. They developed a number of major long-distance trade routes and by the beginning of the nineteenth century were starting to open up caravan routes to the coast.

The dhow

Early seafarers did not have as many problems sailing on the Indian Ocean as they did on the Atlantic. This was because the monsoon winds of the northern Indian Ocean blow towards Africa in the winter and towards India and the Arabian peninsula in the summer months. Small and less sophisticated vessels could thus travel these routes regularly. The northern end of the Mozambique Channel between Africa and Madagascar is the southerly limit of reliable monsoon winds. East Africa’s ties to international markets were via the dhow. Because the hulls of many dhows (up to 1 500) were sewn rather than nailed, there were limits to their durability and size. But even this limited craft with its lateen sail had great advantages over land travel. A dhow could cross the Indian Ocean in about a third of the time it took a Saharan camel to travel the same distance, and one boat could carry the same amount as 1 000 camels. Also the number of crew members required was far smaller than the number of men needed to accompany a caravan in the desert.

Dhow traffic was limited by the monsoon winds and the most densely populated centres. Earliest overseas contacts with East Africa were from the Red Sea and took place in ancient times. By exploiting the south–east north–west monsoons, boats could come from as far away as the Persian Gulf. In the last few centuries BC and the first few centuries AD, Greek and Graeco-Roman merchants based in Egypt linked the western Indian Ocean into a trading network. They obtained spices, incense, gum, ivory, gold and slaves from Northeast Africa. Their hold on the western Indian Ocean trade declined in the fourth century, and for a while Persian naval power dominated the region, until in the seventh century, when Muslim Arabs secured control of Egypt and the Red Sea coasts, and then steadily advanced southwards.

Swahili

By the ninth and tenth centuries there were a number of Muslim towns that had been founded by Arabs, mainly on the Somali coast but also in Zanzibar and Pemba. Around the end of the twelfth century Kilwa, on the southern Tanzanian coast, was settled. From about 1200 it became the most prosperous of the trading city states on the east coast.

Each of these coastal settlements developed into an independent state. The east coast trading settlements had a major cultural influence on the coastal Bantu. A homogeneous Swahili culture was created along the entire coast. (The name ‘Swahili’ comes from the Arabic word sahel, coast – Swahili therefore meaning ‘the people of the coast’.) The Swahili language, Kiswahili, was basically Bantu with many borrowings from Arabic.
From about the thirteenth century it began to supersede Arabic as the everyday language on the coast. By the sixteenth century Swahili literature had appeared, and by the nineteenth century historians were beginning to write their works in Swahili instead of Arabic. This influence was, however, confined to the coast, and until the nineteenth century the coastal trading towns had very little contact with the interior.

Trade

There were so many cities on the coast because there was no single focal point for trade. A mainstay of the dhow trade was mangrove tree poles which were used in building houses throughout the Persian Gulf. Arab traders of the Persian Gulf took iron, ivory, gold, gum copal, and slaves to Asia and returned with cowries, porcelain and cloth. The demand for both ivory and slaves was growing. Ivory and slaves could be obtained from a number of different places on the Somali coast. Because this sea trade was more efficient than camel trade, a wider range of goods could be carried than in the Saharan commerce, which was limited to luxury goods.

Because of the monsoons, shippers from the Persian Gulf preferred the northern ports, but in the course of the fourteenth century the availability of gold resulted in a move away from northern ports such as Mogadishu towards places like Kilwa. The coast in the vicinity of the Zambezi River became a favoured point because it gave easy access to the Zambezi valley in the interior where there were gold deposits. Sofala, founded about the twelfth century, became the major post from which the gold of the interior could be tapped.

Great Zimbabwe

There are few ruins of stone buildings in sub-Saharan Africa to tell us about past civilisations, because there was not much good building stone. Most building was done with mud, and with sun-dried or burnt bricks. But in Zimbabwe there are many stone outcrops, and so we have Great Zimbabwe, which was probably at its height in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the fourteenth century Zimbabwean gold resources were probably under the control of the rulers of Great Zimbabwe. By the end of the century Great Zimbabwe had stopped expanding. By the early fifteenth century a new Shona kingdom, known to the Portuguese as Monomotapa, came into being north of Great Zimbabwe. This appears to be the lineal descendant of the Zimbabwe kingdom. The new kingdom secured a large area for itself, and in the 1450s it replaced Great Zimbabwe as the main Shona state in the interior plateau.

Trade in gold

It is estimated that between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries about 1.5 tons of gold per year were being exported. By the time that the Portuguese arrived at the end of the fifteenth century, however, output was already declining. Like the West African gold, this gold also found its way to India, passing from Sofala in Mozambique to Kilwa in southern Tanzania, and Mombasa and Malindi in Kenya. At the height of East African gold production Kilwa had a near-monopoly, but by the fifteenth century Indian merchants had begun to use larger boats which could not easily sail south of Kenya. This introduced a new element into the rivalry for a share in the gold traffic, and Mombasa and Malindi became engaged in a struggle with Kilwa and with each other.

Ethiopia

Portugal made its influence felt both on the east coast of Africa and in Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia had been very dependent upon its cultural and commercial
links with the Greek and Mediterranean worlds, but the rise of Islamic power in the Red Sea cut them off from these. Christian Ethiopia all but disappeared, but from the end of the thirteenth century it began to blossom again. Although Ethiopia was dependent on Islam for its trade, it was able to resist Islam politically until the sixteenth century, when Ottoman Turkish seapower arrived in the Red Sea, and the Muslims were able to obtain a steady supply of firearms. It looked as if Ethiopia would be overrun, but Portugal, responding to an appeal from the Christian king of Ethiopia, whom they by now connected with the stories of Prester John, came to the rescue in 1541 with the arrival of a small but well-armed force.

Although the initial threat was averted, the Portuguese were not strong enough to end Ottoman domination of the Red Sea, and Ethiopian enthusiasm for their presence waned. They needed the profits from trade to buy guns in order to help ward off constant attacks by the pagan Galla to the south, who by 1600 had a third of Ethiopia under their control, but the Portuguese were unable to give a major boost to their trading relations. From the Portuguese point of view it was soon realised that the weakened and divided kingdom would not be of much help to them in fighting the Muslims. Despite this, the friendly relationship might have continued had it not been for the interference of the Jesuits in the traditional Christian Coptic Church. This eventually led to the expulsion of the Portuguese from the country and by the middle of the seventeenth century Ethiopia had closed its doors to all foreigners and cut itself off from the outside world.

Galla pressure continued to undermine the stability and unity of the state, and by the end of the eighteenth century the various provinces that made up Ethiopia had broken away and were ruled by independent princes.

**Arab–Portuguese relations**

On his first voyage of discovery to India in 1498 Vasco da Gama and the Arabs of Mozambique came to blows, and hostility was to characterise Arab–Portuguese relations in East Africa. Besides the religious factor, the Arabs realised that the Portuguese were formidable competitors, and that they wanted to monopolise the trade of the region. It did not take the Portuguese long to appreciate that the largely independent and progressive trading cities of Sofala, Kilwa, Mombasa and Malindi were part of the greater Indian Ocean trading system. The Portuguese determined to gain control of this and also the gold that came to the coast from the interior. The conquest of East Africa was started by Da Gama on his second trip to India in 1502. Arab dhows were no match for Portuguese caravels, nor Arab weapons for Portuguese, and the Europeans soon came to dominate the Swahili states. In 1505 the Portuguese razed Kilwa, which had hitherto been the terminus for much of the gold of the interior; in the same year they built their own factory at Sofala. In 1507 a settlement was established on Mozambique Island, which soon became the centre for Portuguese activity on the east coast. They completed their conquests between 1507 and 1509.

Apart from Mozambique the Portuguese made little attempt to colonise. Although they dominated the east coast their hold on it was very precarious and they did not strike deep roots. They did destroy the prosperity of many of the Swahili city states, however.
Their grip on the coast was stronger in the south than in the north, and in 1593, in order to improve their hold further north, they started building the massive Fort Jesus in Mombasa, which became the centre of Portuguese power on this part of the coast.

The Portuguese hoped that the gold from the inland kingdom of Monomotapa would be attracted to Sofala, but they had overestimated the economic potential of the region. Gold in the interior was limited, and fighting inland hampered its flow. Portugal decided to advance into the gold-producing area herself and in the 1530s she seized the Swahili bases of Sena and Tete, while a Jesuit mission made contact with Monomotapa. After initial setbacks including the killing of a number of missionaries, by 1575 the Monomotapa had allied himself with the Portuguese in the hope that they would help bolster his declining power and ward off threats to his kingdom. But his hopes were dashed and the empire declined between about 1575 and 1666 as a result of Portuguese penetration. The Portuguese eventually ruled the kingdom. But authority was not directed from Lisbon or even Mozambique, and it was mainly Portuguese adventurers who settled in the area. Portuguese citizens carved out huge prazos or estates for themselves in the Zambezi valley, intermarrying freely with the local inhabitants. They made themselves largely independent of Portugal. The indigenous population was harshly treated and numbers of them were enslaved. Portuguese attempts to force the people of Monomotapa to open up new mines led to widespread resistance. The gold trade dwindled to nothing as the empire broke up.

Violence became endemic and in the late seventeenth century private armies controlled by wealthy cattle-owners became the order of the day. By the 1670s one of these had come to dominate much of the northeastern plateau. The name of their army, the Rozvi (the destroyers), soon came to apply to the empire as a whole, while the leader acquired the title Changamire. The Portuguese came into contact with the Rozvi but instead of being able to extend their authority over them the Portuguese found themselves hard-pressed to maintain their trading outposts in the face of vigorous Rozvi expansion. The Portuguese were expelled from the empire which dominated the plateau region for the whole of the eighteenth century, and both the mining and selling of gold became a royal monopoly. The Portuguese were permitted to establish a trading post at Zumbo on the Zambezi, but only their African agents, and not the Portuguese themselves, were allowed to trade in the capital of the Changamire.

On the west coast Portuguese possessions were taken over by European rivals. This did not happen on the east coast. Her competitors did not establish bases on the East African coast. The Dutch with their superior ships could sail directly from the Cape of Good Hope to their empire in the East Indies using the trade winds. Like the Portuguese the British also traded on the Indian mainland and so kept closer to the East African coast than the Dutch, but they had bases on Mauritius, Madagascar and the Comores, while on the other side of the Cape they had St Helena. The French too had stopover points on the islands and did not develop any strong interests on the mainland of Africa itself.
Although the Portuguese coastal settlements in East Africa were not directly attacked by their European rivals, the competition provided by other trading companies broke the Portuguese monopoly and the Portuguese empire went into decline. As Portuguese power weakened their east coast bases came under increasing attack by Omani Arabs from Muscat. The Omanis had established themselves in Zanzibar in 1652, and in 1698 they captured Fort Jesus in Mombasa, which was the main bastion of Portuguese power on the northern part of the coast. Portuguese power was henceforth limited to the coast south of Cape Delgado where they retained Sofala and Mozambique. North of this the towns on the coast became linked to the Muslim trading system, with the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, and ultimately with northwest India.

The Swahili were pleased to see the end of the Portuguese as they hoped to re-establish their authority over the city states, but they were soon disillusioned, and Omani governors were sent out to Pemba, Kilwa and other cities. Although the Swahili were originally opposed to this development, in practice Omani rule did not restrict their freedom. The hold of the Omani Arabs on the east coast was slight and control was nominal, but as more Arabs emigrated to Africa from Muscat, the Omani presence was strengthened.

AFRICAN TRADE AND TRADING NETWORKS

African initiatives and rationality

A. G. Hopkins in *An economic history of West Africa*, published in 1973, stressed that one should not apply separate criteria to the actions of Europeans and the indigenous peoples of Africa. In reply to those (and they were in a great majority) who stressed supposed African cultural impediments to effective economic response, Hopkins argued that Africans did act rationally, and that the belief that they did not do so was based largely on European misconceptions. Historians such as Hopkins have argued that if Africans did not use the wheel there were very practical reasons why they did not do so. Their failure to use it was not due to any cultural or religious restrictions. In fact the people of the Sudan were very quick to adopt any innovation from North Africa or elsewhere if they could find a use for it. The wheel had been introduced into North Africa during ancient times but had been abandoned because of distances and the terrain, which made roads unfeasible. In the Sahara the sand made the wheel impracticable. Although light animal-drawn vehicles such as chariots had been used in certain parts of the Sahara where there was hard ground, the camel and the donkey soon replaced these. Although the inhabitants of the western Sudan and the forest areas knew about the wheel for use on animal-drawn vehicles, they did not adopt it; without proper roads such vehicles would have been useless in the rainy season. Moreover, canoes plying the Senegal and Niger rivers and Lake Chad provided a more efficient means of transport. In the forest zones one could not use oxen because of the tsetse fly. Roads were poor and required a great deal of labour to repair, which would have been a waste in an area that was sparsely populated and where labour was at a premium.
Labour scarcity

A central theme that dominates the work of African historians is that, in relation to the amount of land that was available for cultivation, the population of Africa was very small. There was more land waiting to be cultivated than there were people to cultivate it. Labour was at a premium. This meant, for example, that shifting cultivation and the burning of bush to clear it were economical in terms of labour. At the same time burning returned mineral matter to the soil. The most economical way to farm was to use your scarce labour sparingly and your land lavishly. Colonial officials all too often characterised African farming as wasteful and inefficient, with land typically being left fallow for a period of between one and eight years.

Innovations

When Africans did see innovations that they could use they were very quick to adopt them. In this regard one may refer to the adoption of the camel and the horse, or the introduction of new crops from outside the continent. This is an indication of the rationality of the decisions taken by the indigenous people. Hopkins writes that: 'Where new plants and seeds were adopted, it was not because they caught the fancy of a primitive people, but because they were seen as useful additions to the existing range of foods, being worth more than the extra cost of producing them; or alternatively because they were regarded as good substitutes, yielding a higher return for the same input than the crops they displaced. Thus maize has spread in areas formerly dominated by yams and sorghum because it gives two crops a year, both of which have fairly good yields, while cassava has become common in yam-producing regions because it is easy to grow and produces food throughout the year.'

Ralph Austen writes that African farming outputs are not very efficient, that the cattle are scrawny and give only small amounts of milk, and that the herds are too big for the carrying capacity of the land. Even where farmers have both cattle and cultivated land, they do not manure fields, or use oxen to plough or to transport produce. Austen says that the reasons for this should not be sought, as they have so often been done, in laziness, but rather in the fact that pastoralists suffer from drought, disease, floods and theft. A large and scattered herd is the best insurance against such disasters. In the case of agriculturists, where heavy concentrations of seasonal rain and sunlight tend to leach nutrients from soil which has been recently cleared for planting, the manuring of soil by sending cattle over it could aggravate the situation; ox-drawn ploughs, which turn over more topsoil than is needed to cover seeds, likewise expose the soil to more leaching.

Opportunities for trade

In the course of the next few chapters we shall see how Africans took advantage of the new opportunities for trade. They were prepared to innovate, to adapt and to accept new ideas, products and techniques if they could improve their material position, provided that the risk was small in proportion to the gains. Thus they would adopt the wheel or ox-drawn ploughs if they could improve their lifestyle, but the opportunities for taking up such innovations were limited by the soils, climate and types of minerals available. Although most of the arguments brought forward relate to West Africa, this is one that should be borne in mind for the rest of Africa as well. There have been similar studies in South African history with which you may be familiar, and Colin Bundy in his examination of the black peasantry in the Eastern Cape in the last few decades of
the nineteenth century arrived at the same conclusion: that when Africans came across innovations or new opportunities they were quick to utilise them and were not prevented from doing so by cultural or social taboos.6

**Short-distance trade**

Most people were agriculturists, but there were societies that practised both agriculture and pastoralism, and some where pastoralism was the main activity. Which of these activities were practised depended very much on the geography of the area. Activities such as hunting and trading were undertaken mainly on a part-time basis. Hunting was most widespread in the forest where meat was in short supply, and it reached a peak in the dry season when game concentrated at the remaining waterholes and demand for farm labour was low. Hunters were not usually a special breed, but were also farmers. Fishing was particularly prominent along the coast of Senegambia and the Gulf of Guinea, and also in some inland waters, such as Lake Chad and the great bend of the Niger in the western Sudan. Trading was another widespread and important activity.

In the pre-colonial era villages and towns differed from modern towns in that they were mainly places where agriculturists went in order to trade or for purposes of defence. Large numbers of farmers lived in the towns and travelled daily to their farms. Of course there were also hoteliers, transport riders, craftsmen, merchants and clerks in the towns. During the dry season, when there was not much work to be done on farms, people moved about a lot so that the roads were crowded and towns filled with strangers, who were often farmers who had taken the time off to do some trading. Short-distance trading was an important part of the lives of many ordinary folk.

Although African societies have often been portrayed as having subsistence economies, trade, albeit limited, played an important part in the lives of communities. Most households regarded trade as an integral part of their activities. Even among largely subsistence groups, each little bit of trade that they conducted provided them with a surplus that agriculture could not do and thus had a disproportionate effect on their way of life. The basic economic unit was the household, which was in a good position to mobilise additional labour where and when it was required. This was the cheapest form of labour as it was costless. For most ordinary households goods were produced by family labour. Craft production was based on the household unit.

Pottery was probably the most widespread craft, not only because the materials for making pots were usually easily obtained in the local environment, but also because there was no long-distance trade in pots. They were too bulky, they were easily broken, and so were not worth the expense of carrying over any distance. So most households or villages made their own pots. Pottery thus tended to be a part-time occupation, practised particularly during the dry season, when there was not much work on the farms, and also when clay was more easily fired.

Short-distance trade covered a distance of about 15 km, or as far as could be travelled in a day on foot or by donkey. Many households would produce extra pots or other articles for sale in neighbouring villages. Much of the short-distance trade was in the
hands of the women. Although there were permanent markets in the larger towns, much of the household’s surplus production was disposed of at periodic markets in smaller towns which lasted from two to eight days. The profits were usually very small, and there was little chance of bargaining, as everyone was selling the same sort of products.

**West African long-distance and trans-Saharan trade**

Although trade was probably an integral part of the household’s activities, there was not much incentive to produce a surplus for trading purposes. Scarce commodities that might have been purchased with such surpluses were too expensive. The great cost of transport meant that only the relatively wealthy could afford goods carried over long distances, whereas goods carried over short distances were not in great demand because everyone had the same sort of merchandise. In an area where cattle were kept no cultivation was usually possible, so that all the people in the neighbourhood were cattle owners, who had the same products to exchange. In those places where cattle owning and agriculture were possible, the cattlemen planted their own crops. So this limited exchange.

The best opportunity for exchange was between agriculturists and cattle-keepers, which usually involved a trade route oriented north–south from one geographical zone to another (rather than a east–west orientation which remained within a single geographical zone) and this usually meant more than short-distance trade. It is no coincidence that most of the major long-distance routes ran in a north–south direction. The pastoralists of the borderlands of the desert would trade Saharan salt, livestock and dairy products with the agriculturists of the savanna in return for cereals and cloth. And the inhabitants of the savanna in their trade with the forest peoples would sell cloth, dried fish and potash, as well as livestock, and receive in return slaves, ivory and kola nuts. Long-distance trade took place mainly in articles that were scarce and could not, like pottery or farm products, be obtained everywhere. The sort of articles carried tended to be high-value/low-bulk items.

Although some goods were exchanged in a barter system, most trade, especially long-distance trade, was conducted in one of the pre-colonial currencies of gold, cowrie shells, strips of cloth, or copper and iron rods. Cowrie shells, the major export of the Maldives Islands for hundreds of years, first reached West Africa overland via the Middle East and North Africa. By at least the eleventh century they were being used as currency in the main markets of the middle Niger. By the fifteenth century cowrie shells were to be found in most parts of West Africa, and from the sixteenth century they became more plentiful when European traders began bringing them to the Atlantic coast. Cowries were the most widespread currency in West Africa, and they remained so until the late nineteenth century. The cowrie was so successful because it was easy to handle owing to its size and shape, it was easy to count and impossible to counterfeit, and it was durable and could be stored for a long time.
But payment was made in various other currencies as well, each of which came to be dominant in a particular locality. From the Senegal River to the modern Ivory Coast, iron bars about three metres long and weighing about 12 kg were a widely used form of currency. On the Gold Coast gold dust was used for large transactions of all kinds, not merely for slaves. Gold dust was carried in small bags and measured on a balance or it could be in the form of mithqals (dinars). Mithqals, minted at Nikki in what is now northern Benin, circulated widely in the eastern half of the western Sudan in the early nineteenth century. There were many different types of currency in vogue in the Bight of Biafra. Besides cowrie shells and cloth, they also used the manilla, a brass object in the shape of a horseshoe.

Transport costs

Whether imported from another geographical zone or from abroad, goods in long-distance trade were expensive mainly because the cost of transport was so high. To equip a caravan for the trans-Saharan trade required a considerable amount of capital and access to credit, which tended to work in the favour of big firms, a number of which were established in Timbuktu. The desert crossing was very dangerous and could be made only at certain times of the year. Sandstorms, lack of water, huge and sudden variations in the temperature, the real danger of losing one’s way, and armed bands of robbers were some of the hazards that travellers faced.

The camel

The camel made the journey across the Sahara possible, but it also imposed limitations. It was very slow and inefficient. The camel could travel only 30 to 45 km a day and it needed people to unload it every day, sometimes twice a day. Each camel could carry between 120 and 150 kg. Because it often took over two months to cross the desert, much of the cargo consisted of provisions for the journey itself. Goods had to have high value for their weight, as freight charges could add 100–150 per cent to the cost of most items.

The donkey

The camel was not used very much in the western Sudan partly because it preferred the poorer fodder of the desert, and partly because it fell prey to diseases such as sleeping sickness. So in long-distance trade from North Africa goods would be carried southwards by camel. At centres such as Timbuktu, the camels would be unloaded and the goods transferred to donkeys and oxen, which were better suited to savanna conditions. Donkeys were the main pack animals in the western Sudan. Although they could carry only about 50 kg, which was much less than oxen could manage, donkeys had certain advantages: they did not cost as much, either to buy or to feed, they were faster than oxen and more effective over rough country.

Porters

Where the savanna met the forest, another change in transport would be necessary. Trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness) and a shortage of grazing restricted the use of pack animals in the forest zone, and goods destined for further south would be transferred to porters. Professional carriers, who were often slaves, could carry loads of about 25–30 kg on their heads and cover an average of 32 km per day. Head-loading was very expensive and was only done where there was no alternative, as in parts of the forest, or where the carrier was a slave who was to be sold at the end of the journey.
Where possible, water transport was used, but a number of West African rivers had dangerous rapids, or were flooded in the wet season or dry in the dry season. Canoes were adapted to conditions. Some were over 25 metres long and could carry over 100 men. The most important commercial waterways were on Lake Chad, the Niger, Senegal, sections of the Volta and many small rivers in the forest, and also along the coast where there were estuaries and lagoons. The middle section of the Niger River was the busiest inland waterway. It linked Timbuktu to Jenne which was 400 km upstream, and with Gao, about 400 km downstream. Canoes had been active here at least from the thirteenth century. Some canoes could carry as much as 18 000 – 27 000 kg of goods. Water transport was very cost effective, and the middle Niger region became one of the principal centres of precolonial trade in Africa. It encouraged the growth of occupations such as the construction and operating of canoes, and because of the ease with which links could be maintained, it contributed to the political and economic unity of the Mali and Songhai empires.

African transport costs were thus very high. In the nineteenth century the price of imported cloth at Timbuktu was two to three times as much as it was on the coast. Kola nuts in the precolonial period were a luxury that only the relatively wealthy could afford. In the late nineteenth century one kola nut that cost 5 cowries at Gonja, where it was produced, sold for 250-300 cowries at Lake Chad (about 2 000 km away).

Long-distance trade in the Sudan itself was in the hands of professional carriers. The Hausa and Dyula were the leading professional long-distance traders. The Dyula were Mande, and were especially important in the western part of West Africa. Hausa traders were predominant in the eastern part of West Africa, moving out from their base in northern Nigeria to trade as far away as the Gold Coast.

There were many trade routes from north to south. Starting in the west, the most important were those from ancient Ghana and Timbuktu to Mogador and Fez, from Timbuktu and Kano to Tunis and Tripoli, and from Borno to Tripoli. In Carthaginian and Roman times the most important route was that from Murzuk, the capital of Fezzan, which linked Tripolitania and Egypt with the Niger bend. After the rise of Islam the road from Timbuktu to Morocco was considered very good. But it would seem that no single route ever achieved predominance. One might say that over the centuries there was a progressive shift from the western to the eastern routes, but it certainly was not a rapid movement and we should not make too much of it. But as a general indication, up to about the thirteenth century the route from ancient Ghana was the dominant one; during the time of the Mali and Songhai empires, the routes from Timbuktu really came into their own, while from the seventeenth century onwards the routes from Kano and Borno became very important.

Trade between North Africa and the Sudan across the Sahara went through various cycles. Initially transport was a great limitation. Horse and ox-drawn vehicles were of no use and the Romans brought the camel to Africa from the Middle East only in the first centuries BC. This gave an impetus to the trans-Saharan route. After the collapse of Roman rule in the fourth century AD, trade diminished and picked up only again after the re-conquest of North Africa by the Byzantines in 533-535. The rise of Arab
Power from the seventh century saw trans-Saharan commerce grow, and Arab missionaries and traders were present in the western Sudan from about the second half of the eighth century. Arab influence was able to grow more rapidly after the Almoravid invasion brought down the ancient empire of Ghana in 1076. Saharan trade routes flourished in particular from the middle of the thirteenth century to the end of the sixteenth century as in this period there was an upswing in the demand for West African products in Europe and the Middle East.

Some historians paint a picture of flourishing long-distance trade, an inter-regional trade that did not depend much on foreign demand for African products. There is an ongoing debate between those who play down the effect of international trade on Africa or emphasise its negative effects on African society and those who see foreign trade as the great stimulant for African producers. R. A. Austen maintains that the stimulus to produce a surplus was very limited where short-distance trade was concerned. The big incentive to produce a surplus for exchange, he believes, did not come from the food-producing sectors themselves, but from the arrival of non-African traders looking for specialised goods such as gold, slaves and wild forest products. In other words, the main stimulus for producing a surplus was an external one. A large part of long-distance trade was geared specifically for the international market, but it is important to remember that the way in which this international trade developed depended very much on the structure of existing market centres and patterns of exchange that had been developed between agriculturists, pastoralists and fishermen within the continent.

The production of goods specially for the export market is regarded by economists as a positive development. It generates extra economic activity. The surplus generated by exports buys imported goods which can be used to develop processing industries. Exports which require re-working or processing before being exported stimulate industries. But in Africa very little of the exports required processing of any kind.

The most important items that made up this trans-Saharan external trade were gold and slaves. The gold trade had existed in Carthaginian times or earlier. Although gold had been mined from an early date, it was only with the development of commercial contacts with the Arabs in the eighth century that production expanded. Most of the production was exported. In the eleventh century the Muslim world adopted gold coinage, and after 1252 gold began to replace silver as Europe's main currency. At first the gold for this trans-Saharan trade was obtained not far from the centres of the Ghana and Mali empires – Bambuk on the upper Senegal and Bure northwest of the modern Republic of Guinea.

During the Middle Ages the Sudan played a major role in the world economy as the main supplier of gold to the Mediterranean markets. From the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries Africa was the leading international supplier of gold. According to modern estimates, at the peak of the gold trade in medieval times over one ton of gold a year went to the Mediterranean. Although these gold figures are not impressive, and even by the seventeenth century the silver mines of the New World had eclipsed Africa as a producer of bullion, it would seem that 'West African gold was absolutely vital for
the monetization of the medieval Mediterranean economy and the maintenance of its balance of payments with South Asia.\(^8\) Gold was taken into the desert at the western end, often going to the closest North African ports, from where it would be transported, either by sea or land, to Egypt, then down the Red Sea to India, to pay for the spices and silks sought after by Mediterranean commerce. Gold exports certainly played a role in the rise of North African ports from the end of the twelfth century, and gold contributed to the wealth of the great states of the western Sudan.

The pull of the west coast

It is often supposed that the golden age of trans-Saharan trade came to an abrupt end in the sixteenth century as a result of the establishment of a European presence on the west coast and the beginning of a long period of instability in the western Sudan after the fall of the Songhai empire in 1591. The decline of this trade was then aggravated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by economic stagnation and decline in the Islamic Middle East. One should not exaggerate the impact of 1591, however. It did not bring about total chaos and unrelieved economic decline. The effect of the stagnation of the Islamic world on trans-Saharan trade was more than compensated for by increased European presence in North Africa.

The immediate effect of the European presence on the west coast should also not be exaggerated. It is sometimes supposed that trade from the western Sudan immediately reversed direction and instead of going northwards across the Sahara, now went to the west coast. The impact of the European presence on the West African coast was not immediate or dramatic. By the seventeenth century, however, most of the gold destined for Europe went via West Africa rather than North Africa. Although this ended the Sudan's role in the international economy, it did not ruin Sudanic trade and industry. The trans-Saharan routes held their own against the pull of the Atlantic coast so long as transport between the Sudan and the Atlantic relied on donkeys, oxen and porters, which were all less efficient than the camel. Trans-Saharan trade actually increased in value in the nineteenth century, and its final decline occurred only after 1875. It was only in the twentieth century, with the advent of railways, that it was cheaper to reach the Sudan from the west or the south rather than from the north. The Sahara could compete with the Atlantic because the Sudan produced other commodities to replace gold, which was now taken via the coast. From the seventeenth century the slave traffic expanded considerably.

Not all areas felt the pull of the west coast trade equally strongly. The Senegambia area was closely integrated into the Sudanic zone, and long-distance trade was under the control of Sudanic Muslim Dyula merchants. The Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin were forest areas which had strong links with the Sudanic system, but were not so closely integrated into it. The major inland states here – Asante, Dahomey, Oyo and Benin – controlled traffic to the coast, but even after the opening up of the Atlantic frontier they continued to have strong ties with the savanna and even the Sahara. East and south of the Niger and its delta, there was little or no contact with the Sudanic
system and this region was most immediately affected by the coming of European traders to the coast.

However, even those areas of the western Sudan with strong ties with the north also had trading contacts, directly or indirectly, with the west coast. Many of the slaves that went to the Atlantic trade were sent there by Sudanese traders. As the forest states became wealthier as a result of their trade with Europeans, they bought more from the Sudan – various kinds of salts, cattle products and cloth.

In the later medieval period Hausaland was overshadowed by Borno to the northeast and Songhai to the west. But from the sixteenth century Hausaland became the most dynamic region in the whole savanna region. A high density of population was possible because there were many river valleys and irrigated cultivation was possible throughout the year. A number of independent states developed, with many walled settlements. The area was well known for its manufacturing of textiles. By the eighteenth century Hausa traders and urban handicraft manufacturers had a very profitable network, although the full potential of this was not realised because of the many wars fought between the various independent Hausa states.

The high cost of overland transport provided an incentive for the growth of local industries. It gave Sudanese domestic markets a measure of protection which encouraged the development of local industries. This was in contrast with the situation that developed later near the west coast, where the influx of cheap manufactured European goods undermined local crafts and industries, which could not compete. So Timbuktu in the medieval period and Kano in Hausaland in later times became manufacturing as well as commercial centres. Cotton textiles were woven, dyed and made into clothing. Some silk, woollen and raffia cloth was also made. This industry expanded after contact with the Islamic world in the eighth century, which brought with it more contact with markets in the Arab and European world. By the twelfth century cotton goods from the western Sudan were well known in Europe. The whole manufacturing process was carried out locally. Timbuktu, on the southern border of the Sahara, had 26 master tailors at the close of the sixteenth century, many of whom employed between 50 and 100 apprentices and workers. By the middle of the nineteenth century Kano was a major cloth centre, as the German traveller Barth testified. He estimated that Kano’s cloth sales amounted to at least 300,000,000 cowries a year in the 1850s, equivalent to about £40,000.

Where cattle were kept in the western Sudan, hides, skins and leather goods were sold. Many of the products known in Europe as ‘Moroccan’ leather came from West Africa. Iron-working was widespread, but in many places either there was not enough ore or not enough specialists to work it for special needs, for example weapons of war. In the nineteenth century the major work of Kano blacksmiths was to make wooden handles for imported sword blades.

This anomaly, that those furthest away from the new outside influences were more easily able to develop their potential than those who had the closest contact with Europe, is a theme to which we return in the following chapters.
Notes

1 J. D. Fage, *A history of Africa*, p. 56.
6 C. Bundy, *The rise and fall of the South African peasantry*, p. 36.