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Into the Looking Glass of West African Transformation

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Africa as a subject of study is often divided into sections that share similar characteristics due to its long and complex history. West Africa has a long history that allows it to be studied from various points of view, in this case being examined in terms of changes. Over the course of less than three centuries, West Africa went from being a self-sufficient region with wealthy areas to being dependent on imports, outside resources, and aid. During this transition, there is a remarkable change in the institutions (such as religion, economy, and the family), class and gender roles, and ultimately the self-sufficiency that enabled them to dictate the trade that initially generated their wealth.

The various institutions that allowed for the functional states of West Africa, such as Niumi in the Senegambia, included religion, the market, and the family all of which changed over time as a direct result of the increase in economic strength of the region as a whole. Originally, the economy relied on the inter-state and inter-regional trade of products like salt, iron, and cloth. However, as trade expanded to include European foreigners, that offered luxury items, trading took on a more profitable and dramatic influence on the lives of people living in West Africa. Economically, trade allowed for the further spread of Islam throughout West Africa because Muslim merchants were able to set up villages or move into already well-established villages to do business or establish schools that allowed them to teach and potentially convert the

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locals in the area. Additionally, Islam was able to incorporate local beliefs into its practices which allowed for it to be much more suitable to the West African belief system because of its mysticism. The prevalence of Islam relates back to the economic shift in West Africa because Muslims were among the wealthiest people living in their villages. Despite their weaker influence as a result of European trade, Muslims could offer magical services and benefit off of the trade in products and people that increased between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

In addition to the Islamic faith that allowed for these merchants to move around into powerful villages and states, it allowed for wealth to be accumulated. The accumulation of wealth also meant that men could improve their lineages and statuses by marrying into more powerful lineages and the accumulation of people (such as slaves, additional wives, and hangers-on). A wife was paid for with a bridewealth, which would reimburse the bride’s family for the economic loss of the female to another lineage, and a man could have as many wives as he desired if his lifestyle allowed for it. Because of the practice of polygyny, men were able to “maximize fertility” and establish “stronger…kinship ties across village and state lines.” Besides having better chances of large families, improved statuses, and economic stability, Muslims were able to use their religious and economic ties to be well educated and practice professions such as those of “counselors, or interpreters of the laws”. As a result, these “negro-lawyers”, who “studied, with particular attention, the institutions of the prophet”, had a significant amount of power both politically and religiously since Islamic law offered an orderliness that attracted both West African leaders and their subjects. However, the most

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2 Wright, 33.
3 Wright, 44.
4 Wright, 44.
5 J.P.L. Durand, *A Voyage to Senegal OR, HISTORICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND POLITICAL MEMOIRS, RELATIVE TO THE DISCOVERIES, ESTABLISHMENTS, AND COMMERCE OF EUROPEANS IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN, FROM Cape Blanco to the River of Sierra Leone* (1806), paragraph 8.
6 Durand, paragraph 8.
important note about the change in religion and economy in West Africa is that these institutions resulted in changes for many areas in different ways. In some areas, such as Walata and Mali, visitors from other parts of Africa observed the Muslims as “punctilious in observing the hours of prayer, studying books of law, and memorizing the Koran”, but the women were allowed to be naked which goes against Muslim sharia law or they were allowed a great deal of social freedom like friendships with men.\(^7\) Since evidence suggests that Muslims adapted Islam to their particular surroundings, variations such as the enforcement of sharia law varied throughout West Africa which sometimes clashed with the more conservative views of visiting Africans from regions such as the North.

One of the prime examples of the way Muslims lived in a particular state was through the modeling of the religious practices from the mansa, the ruler of the Mandinka state\(^8\). In addition to being deeply connected to religion, the mansa was always from one of the more powerful lineages among Mande-speakers. As the economy altered the importance of wealth and religion, it also altered the way a lineage was structured over time. The primary alteration was the acceptance of the new members into the extended family of the mansa, and the other powerful men in the village or state. Through the landlord-stranger relationship, foreigners (Europeans or other Africans) assimilated into West African society, sometimes with the mansa himself acting as the landlord. This system allowed for a stranger to be sponsored and supported by a native of a given village until the newcomer was able to support himself and repay his debts.\(^9\) Landlord-stranger relationships sometimes led to acceptance of the stranger into the landlord’s family through marriage because one of the responsibilities of the landlord was to help the stranger

\(^7\) Ibn Battuta, *Ibn Battuta’s Travels (West African Excerpts)*, paragraphs 8 and 23.

\(^8\) Wright, 35.

\(^9\) Wright, 50.
amass “bride wealth and [find] a suitable marriage partner” for a stranger who remains in the village for an extended period of time.¹⁰

Because strangers assimilated into West African society and traders engaged in temporary relations with locals, the family structure was altered in terms of physical appearance and the development of new classes of people. When Atlantic trade was prosperous, the Portuguese were the primary oceanic traders that West Africans worked with on a regular basis. In fact, it was a common observation of the Europeans to see the Portuguese naturalize into Gambian society “while their descendants gradually [became] Africans… [and] spread into the interior, and [lived] on good terms with the natives.”¹¹ The descendants of the Portuguese were called lancados, or Luso-Africans, and they became an important part of West African society because of their services in trading. Luso-Africans “amassed considerable wealth and had ties…to ruling lineages of the Gambian states” all of which allowed them to be “the dominant middlemen in the trade between the Atlantic and the head of navigation.”¹² Since the Luso-Africans developed into a class all their own, they also established a sub-structure among themselves according to their jobs and roles in the state. For example, some Luso-Africans were wealthy merchants while others served as gromettas who worked as “auxiliary boatmen, interpreters, and other sorts of commercial and cultural intermediaries.”¹³ However, despite their assimilation into West African society Luso-Africans were always considered foreign and were therefore not able to gain enough power to rule a state or be considered a natural member of the society in which they lived. But before their disappearance, as a result of continued marriage with Africans and none with foreigners, Luso-Africans were able to alter the social structure in

¹⁰ Wright, 50.
¹¹ Durand, paragraph 4.
¹² Wright, 106.
¹³ Wright, 107.
one important way. They paved the way for women to take a more active role in the trade industry with many Luso-African traders being prominent women. For example, Signora Belinguere “had a network of sources that provided her with commercial intelligence; and [she] could secure credit for nonaffiliated traders.”

While Luso-Africans were able to move into the social hierarchy, though they were considered outsiders, their wealth depended heavily on the Atlantic trade that was prosperous for West Africans from 1600 to the 1800s. Furthermore, they were not the only people dependent on trade for their wealth, because Gambian ruling elites were dependent on trade to acquire their luxury goods and resources, such as horses and foodstuffs that kept them in power. In the beginning of the Atlantic trade West Africans dictated the terms of trade to the Europeans because they were at an advantage with items like gold, slaves, musk, and hides to trade. For example, the king of New Calabarr boarded a ship name Arthur to negotiate prices for the slaves and food (particularly yams) they were going to trade with the English crew. This situation indicates that the Europeans were often kept away from the mainland until negotiations were to the satisfaction of the Africans and in other accounts of similar transactions Europeans complain about high prices for slaves and other commodities that sometimes result in bad products. In contrast, as time wore on the Africans continued to import luxury items, raw materials, and consumer goods though they eventually minimized the importing of raw materials. This meant that West Africa “became more and more dependent on items its wealthy ruling strata enjoyed

14 Wright, 107.
16 Worger, 44-45.
and made use of for social and political purposes, but not items that enable them to become productive over the long term.”

Up until the mid-eighteenth century, West African states such as Niumi were able to produce their own crops to feed their population and were prosperous enough to avoid food shortages if the trade was disrupted. However, by the mid-1740s “drought and...locusts, the crop failures [and their] regular recurrences, altered Niumi’s agricultural self-sufficiency and...turned it into an importer of foodstuffs.” Furthermore, the state management in West Africa also changed over time with powerful lineages being able to buy into ruling privileges, by contributing cavalry and owning many slaves, with the “rotating system of succession” that allows the crown of a state to pass among elite lineages that maintained control of the state. It was this system of succession that allowed the West African states security from invading neighbors, and improved wealth because of the importing of resources such as swords and horses. However, as West Africa continued to participate in the Atlantic trade their “dependence on trade [was] for an essential commodity rather than a desirable one or a luxury good” since they needed grain imports by the late eighteenth century.

In a matter of centuries, West Africa went from a resource rich region of Africa with an abundance of wealth, to a trade dependent region in need of food due to poor investments. West Africans set out to change their tastes, governments, and social structures to better suit the trading environment in the seventeenth century. West Africa set many of the rules of the Atlantic trade, and depleted some of its population and resources in order to fulfill the extravagant tastes

17 Wright. 111.
18 Wright, 111.
19 Wright, 111.
20 Wright, 71.
21 Wright, 105.
22 Wright, 112.
of the elites. However, in the long run, West Africa was unable to recover from its poor investment in unproductive items and ended up being taken advantage of by the Europeans who once answered to them on price and required commodities for trading.