

Chapter 2

Early African Societies and the Bantu Migrations

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

It could be argued that no society in the ancient world possesses the mystique of Egypt. The image of the pyramids is indelibly etched in our collective imagination. However, Egypt's relation to its African neighbors, most notably Nubia, is often overlooked. Both societies developed an agricultural foundation and later large cities. Both areas developed sophisticated political, religious, and social structures. To the south, in sub-Saharan Africa, Bantu speakers began migrating throughout the center and southern regions of the continent. Eventually the Bantu migrations would transform most of Africa.

THEMES

- *Agriculture and climatic change.* Rising temperatures in northern Africa led to changes in human behavior that encouraged agricultural development. Many human communities concentrated along river valleys, such as the Nile valley.
- *Cross-cultural interaction.* Egypt and Nubia developed close economic and commercial ties, a process that encouraged a vast exchange of ideas, people, and commodities.
- *The growth of centralized government.* Centralized political authority embodied in the absolute ruler the pharaoh in Egypt and the person of the king in the region of Kush (Nubia). Elsewhere in Africa, Bantu speakers constructed communities around agricultural traditions that emphasized age groupings rather than social status.
- *Development of organized religion.* Organized religious traditions appeared in Egypt and Nubia that included worship of Amon and Re, sun gods, the cult of Osiris, pyramid-building, and in Egypt, mummification of the dead. Monotheism predominated among Bantu speakers and other African peoples.
- *Skills and iron.* Emergence of complex city-states allowed Nile valley peoples to expand skill-sets and construct extensive trade networks. In both northern and sub-Saharan Africa, iron work provided a catalyst for migration and territorial expansion.

LECTURE STRATEGIES

Egyptian and Nubian Religious Beliefs

Instructors can always make use of stories and concepts from religion and mythology for this period. Peoples of the ancient world, and especially the Egyptians and Nubians, were profoundly

influenced by their religious beliefs. Examples drawn from the *Book of the Dead* are a great fit here. The students can mistakenly assume that the Egyptians were morbid because of their fascination with mummification and the next world. Instead, Egyptians' sense of certainty and love of life was simply transferred to the afterlife. The development of the first systematic view of the afterworld was a profound moment in human history. The Great Hymn to Aten (easily found online) is another great source. Akhenaten's monotheism, although short-lived, is arguably the world's first form of monotheism. This gives the instructor an early opportunity to bring up the complexity of monotheism. Ask the students to consider why Akhenaten's faith didn't survive past the end of his own life.

Egypt and Nubia

The relationship between Egypt and Nubia would be a great lecture topic, especially since the Nubians have lived in the historical shadow of Egypt for so long. The authors do a nice job discussing Egypt in a broader African context. Ask the students to compare and contrast the two societies and propose their own theories on how the two peoples might have influenced each other. This also gives the instructor the opportunity to examine how trade can bring societies together (or sometimes push them into war) and also acts as a conduit for cultural transmission.

The Legend of Osiris and the Egyptian View of the Afterlife

The legend of Osiris is a great story to tell students. Primarily, it's just a great story and never fails to grab their attention—something that is an important precedent to establish early in the semester. Secondly, it is representative of so many crucial Egyptian concepts. Horus' role in the story explains why the Egyptians considered the pharaoh to be divine. The restorative power of the Nile is demonstrated, so the story works as a useful nature myth—the battle between nature (Osiris) and the desert (Set). Most importantly, the students gain an appreciation of the Egyptian view of the afterlife.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Comparing Mesopotamia and Egypt

A good subject to facilitate discussion is to ask the students to explain in what ways the Mesopotamians and Egyptians were similar and in what ways they were different. This allows the students to understand there might be a commonality to the human experience. It also forces them to recognize how something like geography can influence not only their lives on earth, but also their worldview and their view of the gods and an afterworld. A good place to start is to ask them how geographical conditions might have influenced the development of their own country. In what ways has the isolation and agricultural bounty of the United States left Americans optimistic? Once the students understand a little about the very different geographies of Mesopotamia and Egypt it is relatively simple for them to draw conclusions about how these early societies might have viewed themselves. Since this is a recurring theme, especially in the ancient world, it is valuable for the students to understand this concept from the very beginning of the class.

Understanding the Importance of the Pyramids

There are few discussion topics as popular among students as that of the pyramids. Mainly this is true because the students actually know something about the pyramids (which is pretty rare for something this far back in history) and generally find them fascinating. So much of the ancient world is a complete mystery to students. Consequently, it is essential to take advantage of this connection. There are many good short films you can make use of to initiate discussion. From this point you can use the pyramids as a springboard to examine much more profound political and religious issues. In many ways the pyramids play the same pivotal role in understanding Egyptian society that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* plays in understanding the Mesopotamians. The students can come to understand how the magnificent nature of the pyramids expresses the power, wealth, stability and religious beliefs of the Egyptians. Plus, the fact that there are still many things that we don't understand about the pyramids injects a sense of mystery into the course.

What's So Special about Egypt?

Ancient Egypt has long captured the imaginations of ordinary people, not just historians. As a group, discuss this fascination with Egypt (as opposed to the other cultures you have studied so far). Come up with five reasons why Egypt has continued to intrigue people. Hint: Think beyond what the culture was like at the time, to include intervening and modern events.

Ancient Egypt in Modern Media

Portrayals of ancient Egypt abound in film, television, and other modern media. Divide the students into groups, and assist them in selecting a film or television episode that incorporates either direct or indirect references to ancient Egyptian civilization. Then, in a subsequent class, allow the students to critically analyze these portrayals in presentations to their peers. These presentations should encourage the students to recognize and engage in the process of understanding and reworking the past through more recent and contemporary cultural contexts.