Urbanization in pre-colonial Africa

In this first article in our three-part series on urbanization in Africa, Dr James D Tarver, author of The demography of Africa, and Dr H Max Miller, University of Georgia, discuss the major developments in urbanization in pre-colonial Africa from their beginning.

The phenomenon of urbanization first appeared in the latter part of the fourth millennium BC in the Mesopotamia valley. Shortly afterwards it emerged in the Nile valley region; and next in the Indus valley (presently West Pakistan, where cities flourished between 2500 and 1500 BC; then in the Huang Ho valley (Yellow River); and later among the Maya in the Yucatan peninsula of Meso-America.

This article traces urbanization and the manner in which it evolved in the African continent in pre-colonial days. Large urban conglomerates appeared in three major regions prior to European colonization and in about two dozen colonies during the colonial period. The other scattered pre-colonial urban centres that emerged in Africa did not directly create sustained urban developments on a major scale as in Egypt and Sudan, the Maghreb region or in West Africa.

Egypt and present-day Sudan

It is estimated that urbanization in Africa began in the fourth millennium, with the earliest Egyptian city appearing between 3300 and 3200 BC. Abydos was probably the first Egyptian settlement that could properly be classified as a city. It is thought to have had about 20,000 inhabitants in 3200 BC and was the earliest known capital of Egypt.

By approximately 3000 BC Egypt was probably the most highly urbanized country in the world, and remained so for many years until the Christian era. For example, Pharaoh Menes founded Memphis at the head of the Nile, about 160 km from the sea in 3114 BC. By 3000 BC it was probably the largest city in the world, with about 30,000 inhabitants.

A second city, Avaris became the largest population centre in the world in 1650 BC with over 100,000 inhabitants. Thebes had a population of more than 100,000 in 1375 BC and was the largest city in the world until 668 BC. In 1160 BC the Thebes estate population totalled 86,486, and 62,621 of these inhabitants were attached to the temple. Then, Alexander the Great founded Alexandria, the new national capital. By 320 BC it was probably the largest city in the world, with about 300,000 inhabitants. In addition, Carthage in northwest Africa had a population of more than 100,000 in 340 BC.

Cairo was founded in 969 AD on the east bank of the Nile, near the present ruins of Memphis on the west bank. This new capital city reached its peak population of about half a million inhabitants in 1340, when it was probably the largest city in the world. A bubonic plague, which originated in China, struck Cairo in 1348 and may have taken the lives of as many as 40 per cent of its residents. (By 1985, Cairo-Giza was not only the largest urban agglomeration in Africa, with 8 million inhabitants, but also the largest population centre in the entire Mediterranean basin.)

Urbanization also occurred along the Middle Nile below Egypt between the first and sixth cataracts in the region that is now the Republic of Sudan. However, this early urban development was on a smaller scale than in Egypt. The earliest Nubian kingdom was established in present-day Sudan during about 1500 BC. There were four early capital cities: Napata, Meroe, Dongola and Sennar. Meroe and Dongola had peak populations of 30,000 or more. (In recent years Sudan has experienced rapid urban growth. By 1980 the Khartoum urban agglomeration was greater than 1.1 million inhabitants and by 1985 had an estimated 1.5 million inhabitants.)

Northwest Africa

The second major area of urban development in Africa was on the Mediterranean coastline in the Maghreb region of northwest Africa. Carthage was founded on the Tunisian coast in 814 BC by the Phoenicians and became the dominant city of its time in that area. Carthage established an empire, which included most of Tunisia and existing Phoenician settlements.
Carthage protected its trade routes and maintained effective control over the entire north African coast, from the Gulf of Sidra off the Libyan coast to the Atlantic coast off Morocco, by establishing new settlements where necessary. In addition, Carthage established settlements on the southern coast of Spain, in Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and the Balearic Islands.

Carthage prospered as a result of its trade with Rome and Greece and also as a result of its trans-Saharan trade - to the extent that it was then considered the richest city in the world.

The population of Carthage probably reached a peak of 200,000 in 200 BC before it was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC.7 Along the coastal areas of present-day Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and western Libya were Carthaginian settlements under the urban influence of Carthage.

As a Roman colony, after the fall of Carthage, northwestern African prospered for two or three centuries. Carthage was rebuilt and the population probably reached a peak of 100,000 in 100 AD.8 About a quarter of a million tonnes of grain and large quantities of olive oil were exported to Rome annually and the growth in population was undoubtably associated with the favourable social and economic conditions.

Many centuries later, from about 1060 AD, the Berbers were responsible for initiating a 300-year period of flourishing economic activity and political power. First, they established the vast Almoravid empire, which comprised Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and southern Spain. Thereafter another Berber group, the Almohads, ruled until 1250. Then, a third Berber group, the Merinids, exercised control until about 1350, after which Berber political power declined.

Many urban centres experienced rapid growth during Berber rule. For example, Fez, with about 200,000 inhabitants, was probably the largest city in the world during about 1170 to 1180. Other North African cities were Marrakesh, with 150,000 inhabitants in 1200; Tunis with 65,000 inhabitants in 1500; Algiers with 10,000 residents in 1634; and Meknes with a population of 200,000 in 1727.

There were a number of other smaller African cities in the Mediterranean region at this time. Present-day Western Sahara, now engaged in a territorial and sovereignty dispute, is the only north African country that was not included in one of the two ancient urbanized regions.

**West Africa**

The West African areas of Sudan and Guinea comprised the third major region that experienced pre-colonial urban development. Urbanization occurred mainly as a result of long-distance trans-Saharan trading that started before the Christian era and the development of indigenous handicraft industries. Walata and Timbuktu, located in the Niger River basin of the Sahel on the edge of the Sahara, grew as commercial centres which started as trading centres where goods from the north and south changed hands. Sudanese traders exchanged gold, ivory, grain, skins, gum, spices, ostrich feathers, kola nuts, woven cloth, and slaves with the North Africans for salt, dates, horses, silk, swords, mirrors, beads and textiles.

Important medieval kingdoms subsequently emerged in these areas, prior to colonization. In the Sudan three major kingdoms emerged in the grassland region of the Niger River basin and two were formed in central Sudan. Further south, several kingdoms and empires were created along the forested Guinea coast, stretching from present day Nigeria to Senegal. The capital cities of these early kingdoms became about half as populous as those in the Maghreb region.

**The Sudanese-Saharan kingdoms**

Ghana, situated between the Senegal and Niger rivers, in present-day Mali, was founded during the fifth century AD. Not to be confused with modern Ghana, it was the earliest of the three major empires in western Sudan and was known as the land of gold because of the Bambuk and Bure goldfields. Its capital city, Koumbi-Saleh, fell to the Almoravids, who were Berbers from North Africa, during a series of religious wars, and was eventually destroyed in 1076, as was the entire Ghana empire during the thirteenth century. A new, vigorous, and somewhat larger empire - the Mali empire - superseded Ghana. Then, in the fourteenth century the weakened and declining Mali empire was replaced by the Songhay empire, which was larger than the Mali empire had been. Koumbi-Saleh, Niani and Gao were the capital cities of these three respective major kingdoms. Koumbi-Saleh probably had 30,000 inhabitants when it was sacked, about a quarter of a million tonnes of olive oil were exported to Rome annually and the growth in population was undoubtably associated with the favourable social and economic conditions.

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The region south of the Songhay kingdom, in the headwaters region of the Volta River, below Jenne and Gao, were inhabited by numerous ethnic groups. The largest and most important were the Mossi, with the two largest Mossi kingdoms being the Wagadugu and Yatenga, both founded between 1050 and 1170 AD. However, they played a comparatively limited role in shaping the great events of the Sudan in the pre-colonial period. The Songhay kingdom fell to the Moors of Morocco in 1591, ending the promising local civilization which existed at that time.

The Hausa states were located in the northern grassland area of present-day Nigeria; in central Sudan, east of the western Sudan kingdoms. In 999 AD, as tradition has it, a father and his six sons established seven Hausa states which were largely independent of each other. The ancient walled capital cities were well fortified. Kano, Katsina and Zaria were major Hausa states, with Kano being the most prominent. Kano had an estimated 25,000 inhabitants in 1200 and 75,000 in 1585. Zaria had an estimated 60,000 in 1600, and Katsina probably had 60,000 in 1700.

The kingdom of Kanem-Bornu, in central Sahel east of Hausaland, was at one time two separate empires, with Kanem on the east and Bornu on the west side of Lake Chad. According to one traditional account, both empires were founded by Prince Ibrahim, who was exiled when Sheba fell in 590 AD. This kingdom controlled the trans-Saharan trade route to Tripoli, where slaves were exchanged with the North Africans for horses. The small capital of Njimi was on the...
east of Lake Chad and Ngazargamu, a later Bornuese capital, had about 60,000 inhabitants in 1324.

**Guinea kingdoms**

Among the many kingdoms that were established in upper and lower Guinea before 1400, were the Yorubas in the western part of Western Nigeria, the Benin to the east of the Yoruba and west of the Niger River delta (not to be confused with the present-day Benin Republic), the little Ibo democracies in southeast Nigeria, the Akan-Ashanti in central Ghana, and the Wolof in Senegal.

Edo City, in the medieval kingdom of Benin, developed somewhat later than the centres in the Yoruba kingdom. However, handicraft industries were quite highly advanced and differentiated in both areas and workers became relatively prosperous. Along the forested Guinea coast, Yoruba cities were comparatively populous settlements performing trading and administrative functions for large areas. Ibadan, with a population of about 70,000 in 1850, was the dominant Yoruba city and Katunga, an Oyo capital, had an estimated 75,000 inhabitants in 1750.

The early capital cities of the major Sahel and Guinea coast kingdoms were, of course, small urban centres in terms of modern standards. Although many persisted for years, none ever seemed to reach a population as great as 100,000 in pre-colonial days.

After the demise of these initial urban centres in West Africa in pre-European days, very little urbanization took place in the period 1600–1850 as a result of conflicts, unrest, and shifting trade patterns – including the slave trade. However, urbanization took off again during the colonial period in Nigeria and Ghana.

**Other pre-colonial urban areas**

Other scattered pre-colonial urban settlements in Africa, such as Great Zimbabwe, Kilwa and Axum, appeared at different times and flourished for varying periods. However, they did not result directly in sustained urban development on a marked scale.

Sustained urban developments appeared in three major areas of Africa in the pre-colonial period. Since the 1870s the discovery of diamonds and gold in South Africa led to its urban developments during the colonial period. It was the most prominent urbanized colony to emerge at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the 50 years that followed, urbanization occurred in a more modest way in another 25 sub-Saharan colonies in the colonial period. However, it was not until after independence that urbanization greatly accelerated in Africa.

**References**

9. The vast loosely defined area, comprising the Sudan (Soudan) and the Sahel, is that part of Africa lying between the Sahara Desert and the forested areas to the south.
10. In pre-colonial times Guinea extended along the West African coast from Cape Verde in present-day Senegal to the Niger River delta in present-day Nigeria.