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Introduction

Migrations in African History: An Introduction

ARIBIDESI USMAN AND TOYIN FALOLA

Migration has become a continuous phenomenon in the history of human societies. Migration is synonymous with the history of Africa itself. The migration of individuals and groups over time is associated with the emergence of cultures and of civilizations throughout the world. This book establishes the centrality of migrations and movements of people in the historical evolution of African peoples and societies. By making use of different sources—oral, archaeological, and written—and focusing on various subjects and geographical areas, the book shows that migration was a multifaceted phenomenon, which varied in nature and character, over time and in different places. Using carefully selected case studies drawn from across the continent, the book provides a broad but insightful overview of the subject of migrations, and the varying impact of slavery, commerce, gender, religion, colonialism, poverty, and development on the movements of people and ideas, and on the development of states and societies on the continent, most especially in the last two centuries.

There are two forms of migration patterns in Africa. These are internal and international migrations. Internal migrations are migrations within countries, while international migrations are movements between countries. The most common form of international migration in the past was the forced migration of the slave trade, conducted by Arab and European traders. Internal migration consists of rural-urban mobility, rural-rural mobility, urban-rural mobility, and urban-urban mobility.¹ The poorly defined boundaries between nations, the complementary nature of the economies of neighboring countries, and the cultural relationship between ethnic groups in various countries obscure the differences between internal and international migration in Africa.²

There are a number of reasons why people in Africa migrate or leave their original homes for places sometimes dissimilar to their prior location. Such reasons have been discussed at length by various scholars.³ They include wars, droughts, and floods; regional inequality of economic development and income; severe population pressure with low agricultural productivity; poverty and hunger in specific regions; the attraction of towns and cities as centers of education, higher incomes, and social amenities; the presence of affiliated ethnic groups and/or kinsmen; the presence of people from the same religious denomination; safety from persecution; and simply personal adventurism. It is not easy to determine the impact of any of these factors individually or as a whole. In most cases, they also depend on the existing political, economic, social, religious, and personal circumstances.

Migration has occurred on a substantial scale many times in the history of the people of the continent, and it goes back in time to the origin of human beings. Migration and population movement in Africa can best be understood within the context of the political and historical evolution of African societies.⁴ This introductory chapter examines migration in the context of the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras, and the effects of various forces—internal as well as external—on society and hence on migration.

The Precolonial Period

Africa has a long history of population movement aimed at lessening the effect of ecological problems and aiding in the search for food, shelter, and security. In the precolonial era, population movements similar to present-day international migration occurred over a wide area. These early movements were unsystematic, and entire groups or villages are known to have moved. Studies have shown that our earliest ancestors, the australopithecines, lived for several million years with the ability to walk upright before developing stone tools.⁵ The earliest known stone tool assemblages date to roughly 2.6 million years ago. The Oldowan stone tools from Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania include “pebble tools,” or “core-choppers,” and small tools that have been lightly modified and may have been used as scrapers. The maker of the Oldowan tools is a hominid called *Homo habilis*, with a brain size of 630 cubic centimeters. The geographical range of *Homo habilis* is the grasslands of eastern and southern Africa, while the climate and microecology continued to change and affect the lives of hominids.⁶

About two million years ago, another hominid, *Homo erectus*, with a larger brain (between 800 and 1,200 cubic centimeters), emerged in eastern Africa. *Homo erectus* coexisted for a time with australopithecines and *Homo habilis*, and by one million years ago had become the only surviving hominid species.⁷ *Homo erectus* was able to spread into new areas through

colonization—a process by which “small groups left the home society to form equivalent communities in ecologically similar territories.”⁸ Fossil remains of *Homo erectus* have been found at Olduvai Gorge, at East and West Turkana, and at Swartkrans in South Africa, as well as at sites in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Related fossils have also been found far to the north in both Morocco and Algeria. About one and half million years ago in East Africa, a new stone technology, the Acheulian, or “hand axe” tool, was associated with *Homo erectus*. These hand axes or bifacial tools are well refined and more carefully made than the early pebble tools of the Oldowan. The Acheulian hand axes continued to be used for over a million years, until just over 100,000 years ago.⁹

An important indication of the successful adaptation of early hominids to a variety of environments is the expansion of *Homo erectus* out of Africa. It was the first hominid to move beyond the African continent. Evidence of this appears to have been found at the important site of Zhoukoudian in northern China, dating to about 500,000 to 240,000 years ago.¹⁰ However, the Asian and European evidence is still controversial, particularly on the issue of chronology, and the excavated stone artifacts, which are more common than fossil remains. Nevertheless, this period saw an increasing capacity to adapt to a wide variety of environments, a capacity that enabled early humans to spread through most of Africa and the wider world. Another hominid species, *Homo sapiens*, whose brain is slightly larger than that of *Homo erectus*, emerged about 200,000 years ago. The evolutionary changes now became more social and were accompanied by increasing population size and the expansion of the geographical range of the hominid.¹¹ There was a substantial change in population distribution in the first hundred thousand years of human existence. During the last 60,000 years, African populations migrated from the savannas of eastern and southern Africa, the home of their hominid ancestors, to the east-west area between modern Sudan and Senegal. The four language groups that are identified on the African continent correspond to the distribution and movement of people over thousands of years.¹²

In the period from 15,000 BP to 5000 BP, agriculture revolution was witnessed in several regions of the world. It appears that the development of agriculture stimulated migration.¹³ The popular theory is that Southwest Asia was the sole site of the invention of agriculture. Studies now indicate, however, that there were long preludes to the development of agriculture and that similar developments took place in several areas of the world, including Africa. Evidence of intensified food gathering, supplemented by intensive harvesting of certain plants as early as 15,000 years ago, has been reported in parts of Africa. In northeast Africa, linguistic evidence indicates that Nilo-Saharan speakers developed an association with cattle, while Afroasiatic speakers were associated with sheep and goats.¹⁴ By about 9,000

years ago, the stone-using people of Napta Playa in the eastern Saharan were domesticating cattle and using pottery.¹⁵ In West Africa, the people belonging to the Niger-Congo language group developed the practice of harvesting of tubers. It is suggested that the harvesting of wild grasses in West Africa probably led to the domestication of rice, and the harvesting of wild tubers led to the development of several types of yam.¹⁶

Agriculture spread to every part of Africa through colonization by farmers as well as by crop migration.¹⁷ In Africa, paleoclimatic studies have demonstrated that significant climatic change occurred in the Sahara during the late Pleistocene and early Holocene periods. Arid conditions prevailed from 21,000 to 12,500 years BP, giving way to a moist period lasting until ca. 10,000 years BP.¹⁸ The period roughly spanning 10,000–5,000 years BP was characterized by the expansion of rivers, marshes, and forests. It was during such moist periods that the spread of agriculture from the Nile Valley or the Mediterranean into the Sahara took place.¹⁹ With the intensification of aridity (ca. 2000 BC) came the movement of populations out of the Sahara, some of them toward the south, taking with them their Middle Eastern wheat and barley. It is likely that the ideas of agriculture spread more rapidly and more thoroughly than farming communities could move. As Manning indicates, “small numbers of migrants, in discussion with those experienced in the lands where they settled, could learn together how to implement agricultural practice in each new era.”²⁰

The expansion of the Bantu-speaking peoples, beginning in distant times and continuing into the modern period, is one of the most challenging problems in migration studies. It is generally recognized that many people living in sub-Saharan Africa speak Bantu languages, over four hundred of these languages, all deriving from the same ancestral language, known as “proto-Bantu.” These languages share the word *ntu*, meaning “person,” while the prefix *ba* denotes the plural in most of these languages, so that *ba-ntu* means, literally, “people.”²¹ These similarities have been established on the basis of lexical, phonetic, morphological, and syntactic resemblances, which cannot be possible by mere chance or by borrowings.²² The Bantu language expansion must have begun after agriculture had spread to the area of origin of the Bantu. Archaeology, linguistic studies, and studies of plant origins show that proto-Bantu probably had its foundation about 3,000 years ago near the Benue River in the western African savanna, where fairly large settlements headed by councils of elders were present.²³

It is generally believed that it was population movement that disseminated the Bantu languages over the subcontinent. Two theories have been suggested to explain the Bantu expansion from the original homelands.²⁴ First, it is claimed that the abandonment of hunting–gathering subsistence economy in favor of an agricultural subsistence economy led to population growth, which consequently led to migrations of people seeking new land.

According to this theory, the migrations of the Bantu peoples from West Africa to central Africa are said to have involved agricultural communities, and the movement is said to have increased after banana and yam, introduced by the Indonesians, spread to the forest peoples of central Africa.²⁵ The second theory provides a link between the expansion of the Bantu and the beginnings of the Iron Age. The working of iron encouraged agricultural production by providing more effective tools that allowed the Bantu to dominate the peoples in the areas where they settled. It is suggested that the Bantu “were a dominant minority, specialized to hunting with the spear, constantly attracting new adherents . . . by their fabulous prestige as suppliers of meat, constantly throwing off new bands of migratory adventurers, until the whole southern sub-continent was iron-using and Bantu-speaking.”²⁶ Other factors, such as famine—leading to the search for better living conditions in the form of good farming and grazing land—epidemics, wars and a sheer spirit of adventure could also have motivated the early Bantu movements.

The Bantu migration, unlike migrations in Africa in recent times, was carried out very slowly over very short distances and probably involved a movement of small numbers of people from one village to the next. This process was repeated over and over again until successive generations reached all parts of subequatorial Africa, perhaps over a thousand or more years.²⁷ After reaching the Congo, the Bantu groups spread to the Zambezi and on to southern Africa. They probably intermarried with or assimilated the Khoisan speakers and other populations they came across. The original inhabitants were foragers and fishermen, but the newcomers were farmers who domesticated goats, produced pottery, and may have practiced weaving. This advanced culture is clearly suggested by the proto-Bantu vocabulary relating to ceramics, goat, and to the cultivation of cereal and root crops.²⁸ A new social organization was also created under the influence of the newcomers. By a thousand years ago, most of central and southern Africa was populated by iron-smelting, Bantu-speaking village inhabitants, who had replaced most of the original hunting and gathering peoples.²⁹

The mass migration of Africans to the Americas, the Middle East, and Europe through the transatlantic and other branches of the slave trade constitutes one of the major events of African history. This emigration, largely involuntary, lasted for centuries, resulting in wider distribution of African communities in various parts of the world, particularly Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. Compared to those passing through the Atlantic slave trade system, the numbers of Africans transported per year to the Mediterranean world were relatively low, since the Mediterranean world did not practice plantation agriculture on an extensive scale. The migration of Africans into Asia and the Levantine was the oldest sector of the African diaspora, and this movement probably started before the beginning of the Christian era.³⁰ This trade is less well known than the Atlantic trade but is

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