CHAPTER 15 - TROPICAL AFRICA AND ASIA, 1200–1500

I. New Islamic Empires
   A. Mali in the Western Sudan
      1. Islam spread to sub-Saharan Africa by a gradual process of peaceful conversion. Conversion was facilitated by commercial contacts.
      2. In 1240 Sundiata (the Muslim leader of the Malinke people) established the kingdom of Mali. Mali’s economy rested on agriculture and was supplemented by control of regional and trans-Saharan trading routes and by control of the gold mines of the Niger headwaters.
      3. The Mali ruler Mansa Kankan Musa (r. 1312–1337) demonstrated his fabulous wealth during a pilgrimage to Mecca. When he returned to Mali, Mansa Musa established new mosques and Quranic schools.
      4. The kingdom of Mali declined and collapsed in the mid to late fifteenth century because of rebellions from within and attacks from without. Intellectual life and trade moved to other African states, including the Hausa states and Kanem-Bornu.

   B. The Delhi Sultanate in India
      1. Between 1206 and 1236 the divided states of northwest India were defeated by violent Muslim Turkish conquerors under the leadership of Sultan Iltutmish, who established the Delhi Sultanate as a Muslim state. Although the Muslim elite then settled down to rule India relatively peacefully, their Hindu subjects never forgave the violence of the conquest.
      2. Iltutmish passed his throne on to his daughter, Raziya. Raziya was a talented ruler, but she was driven from office by men unwilling to accept a female monarch. Under Ala-ud-din (r. 1296–1316) and Muhammad ibn Tughluq (r. 1325–1351), the Delhi Sultanate carried out a policy of aggressive territorial expansion that was accompanied (in the case of Tughluq) by a policy of religious toleration toward Hindus—a policy that was reversed by Tughluq’s successor.
      3. In general, the Delhi sultans ruled by terror and were a burden on their subjects. In the mid-fourteenth century internal rivalries and external threats undermined the stability of the Sultanate. The Sultanate was destroyed when Timur sacked Delhi in 1398.
I. Indian Ocean Trade
   A. Monsoon Mariners
      1. The Indian Ocean trade increased between 1200 and 1500, stimulated by the prosperity of Latin Europe, Asian, and African states and, in the fourteenth century, by the collapse of the overland trade routes.
      2. In the Red and Arabian Seas, trade was carried on dhows. From India on to Southeast Asia, junks dominated the trade routes.
      3. Junks were technologically advanced vessels, having watertight compartments, up to twelve sails, and carrying cargoes of up to 1,000 tons. Junks were developed in China, but during the fifteenth century, junks were also built in Bengal and Southeast Asia and sailed with crews from those places.
      4. The Indian Ocean trade was decentralized and cooperative, with various regions supplying particular goods. In each region a certain port functioned as the major emporium for trade in which goods from smaller ports were consolidated and shipped onward.
   B. Africa: The Swahili Coast and Zimbabwe
      1. By 1500, there were thirty or forty separate city-states along the East African coast participating in the Indian Ocean trade. The people of these coastal cities, the “Swahili” people, all spoke an African language enriched with Arabic and Persian vocabulary.
      2. Swahili cities, including Kilwa, were famous as exporters of gold that was mined in or around the inland kingdom whose capital was Great Zimbabwe.
      3. Great Zimbabwe’s economy rested on agriculture, cattle herding, and trade. The city declined due to an ecological crisis brought on by deforestation and overgrazing.
   C. Arabia: Aden and the Red Sea
      1. Aden had enough rainfall to produce wheat for export and a location that made it a central transit point for trade from the Persian Gulf, East Africa, and Egypt. Aden’s merchants prospered on this trade and built what appeared to travelers to be a wealthy and impressive city.
      2. In general, a common interest in trade allowed the various peoples and religions of the Indian Ocean basin to live in peace. Violence did sometimes break out, however, as when Christian Ethiopia fought with the Muslims of the Red Sea coast over control of trade.
   D. India: Gujarat and the Malabar Coast
      1. The state of Gujarat prospered from the Indian Ocean trade, exporting cotton textiles and indigo in return for gold and silver. Gujarat was not simply a commercial center; it was also a manufacturing center that produced textiles, leather goods, carpets, silk, and other commodities.
Gujarat’s overseas trade was dominated by Muslims, but Hindus also benefited.

2. Calicut and other cities of the Malabar Coast exported cotton textiles and spices and served as clearing-houses for long-distance trade. The cities of the Malabar Coast were unified in a loose confederation whose rulers were tolerant of other religious and ethnic groups.

E. Southeast Asia: the Rise of Malacca

1. The Strait of Malacca is the principal passage from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. In the fourteenth century a gang of Chinese pirates preyed upon the strait, nominally under the control of the Java-based kingdom of Majapahit.

2. In 1407, the forces of the Ming dynasty crushed the Chinese pirates. The Muslim ruler of Malacca took advantage of this to exert his domination over the strait and to make Malacca into a major port and a center of trade.

III. Social and Cultural Change

A. Architecture, Learning, and Religion

1. Commercial contacts and the spread of Islam led to a variety of social and cultural changes in which local cultures incorporated and changed ideas, customs and architectural styles from other civilizations. African and Indian mosques are good examples of the synthesis of Middle Eastern and local architectural styles; in Ethiopia, a native tradition of rock carving led to the construction of eleven churches carved from solid rock.

2. In the field of education, the spread of Islam brought literacy to African peoples who first learned Arabic and then used the Arabic script to write their own languages. In India literacy was already established, but the spread of Islam brought the development of a new Persian-influenced language (Urdu) and the papermaking technology.

3. As it spread to Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, Islam also brought with it the study of Islamic law and administration and Greek science, mathematics, and medicine. Timbuktu, Delhi and Malacca were two new centers of Islamic learning.

4. Islam spread peacefully; forced conversions were rare. Muslim domination of trade contributed to the spread of Islam as merchants attracted by the common moral code and laws of Islam converted and as Muslim merchants in foreign lands established households and converted their local wives and servants. The Islamic destruction of the last center of Buddhism in India contributed to the spread of Islam in that country.
5. Islam brought social and cultural changes to the communities that converted, but Islam itself was changed, developing differently in African, Indian, and Indonesian societies.

B. Social and Gender Distinctions
1. The gap between elites and the common people widened in tropical societies as the wealthy urban elites prospered from the increased Indian Ocean trade.
2. Slavery increased in both Africa and in India. An estimated 2.5 million African slaves were exported across the Sahara and the Red Sea between 1200 and 1500, while more were shipped from the cities of the Swahili coast.
3. Most slaves were trained in specific skills; in some cases, hereditary military slaves could become rich and powerful. Other slaves worked at hard menial jobs like copper mining, while others, particularly women, were employed as household servants and entertainers. The large number of slaves meant that the price of slaves was quite low.
4. While there is not much information on possible changes in the status of women in the tropics, some scholars speculate that restrictions on women were eased somewhat in Hindu societies. Nonetheless, early arranged marriage was the rule for Indian women, and they were expected to obey strict rules of fidelity and chastity.
5. Women’s status was generally determined by the status of their male masters. However, women did practice certain skills other than child rearing. These included cooking, brewing, farm work, and spinning.
6. It is difficult to tell what effect the spread of Islam might have had on women. It is clear that in some places, such as Mali, Muslims did not adopt the Arab practice of veiling and secluding women.