

## LESSON 5

### Social and Cultural Issues

Africa's many different societies and cultures have shown great resilience in the face of significant challenges. The continent's traditional social structures and mores were greatly disrupted by the slave trade and colonization. The fact that 53 national identities have emerged, some stronger than others, is one of the success stories of the postcolonial era. This update touches on four key areas discussed in *Africa in Transition*: 1) the family; 2) the role of women; 3) religion; and 4) urbanization.

#### THE FAMILY

(Insert before "Summation" on page 182)

Children continue to be greatly valued in African culture. In many societies, the number of children a couple has is a source of pride and prestige. Children are also an important source of labor and social security. These factors help account for Africa's high birth rate. On average, African women have five children.<sup>1</sup> Wives who cannot bear children are sometimes divorced.

Africa also continues to have the highest rate of polygamy in the world, with the practice being supported by traditional religions and Islam. It is more prevalent in the rural areas of West, East, and Southern Africa. According to the UN, 42 percent of women in Africa are married by age eighteen, with many women living in polygamous marriages;<sup>2</sup> for example, in Senegal, about 34 percent of marriages are multiple.<sup>3</sup> However, polygamy is generally declining across the continent, especially in urban areas.

#### THE ROLE OF WOMEN

(Insert before "Religion" section on page 183)

Women have long played crucial roles in African societies. Throughout Africa, women perform most domestic tasks: they care for children, the elderly, and the sick; they collect firewood and water; they grow and market food. Despite this, women have traditionally had fewer opportunities for education and less access to health care. They have been subservient to men by law and social practice, and have played only limited roles in family decision-making. Even when women enter the formal work force, they usually work in low-paying agricultural jobs.

The importance of women to economic development is increasingly being recognized. Improvements in women's health care, education, and economic opportunity lead to improvements in food production, housing, nutrition, child survival, environmental protection, and other social and economic areas. In many countries after independence, conditions for women began to improve. Governments expanded social services and made them more available to women. Opportunities for formal-sector employment also increased. As a result of such advances, women's life expectancy at birth jumped from 37 years in the 1950s to 50 years by the late 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, progress for women soon slowed. By the late 1990s, female life expectancy at birth in sub-Saharan Africa had increased to only 54 years, and in 2006 it dropped to 52 years.<sup>5</sup> In some countries, such as Zambia and Zimbabwe, the average life span for women is only 42 years.<sup>6</sup> A key factor accounting for this decline is HIV/AIDS. Sixty percent of those infected with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa are women.<sup>7</sup>

Change is also taking place in other matters. In many urban areas, there are now jobs for women as teachers, civil servants, and clerks. These job opportunities have encouraged more women to move to the cities. Also, microcredit is an important way for women to support their households. Loans from commercial banks are generally unavailable for women, but many have been able to use small microcredit loans from local, nongovernmental, and international organizations to start small agricultural cooperatives, crafts groups, or health centers.

## **RELIGION**

(Insert before “The Arts” section on page 185)

It has been stated that the African is “profoundly and incurably a believer” and that religion “impregnates the entire texture of African individual and cultural life.”<sup>8</sup> African spirituality comes through three major belief systems: traditional religions, Christianity, and Islam. Each has been practiced on the continent for centuries.

### **Traditional Religions**

Africa has thousands of traditional religions, which are influential in most African countries. For example, 25 percent of Sudanese, 40 percent of Cameroonians, and 35 percent of Tanzanians practice traditional religions.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes, the beliefs, practices, and rituals of traditional religions are mingled with other religions, especially Christianity. This creates hybrid faiths called syncretic religions. As many as 10 percent of the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s 67 million people and 50 percent of Zimbabwe’s 12 million people profess belief in syncretic religions.<sup>10</sup>

### **Christianity**

Christianity first came to North Africa under the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries AD. By the fourth century AD, Christianity had reached present-day Ethiopia. However, Christianity’s tenure as the dominant religion in North Africa ended in the seventh century, when Muslim warriors and traders swept out of Arabia. These warriors and traders spread over most of North Africa, which has been primarily Islamic ever since. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia, Christianity survived and prospered. Today, over 50 percent of Ethiopia’s 75 million people are Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Christianity reached sub-Saharan Africa in the 1400s. It was brought by Portuguese explorers, traders, and plunderers. After Europe partitioned the continent in the late nineteenth century, Christianity’s spread in Africa accelerated. During the colonial period, missionaries converted large numbers of Africans. As a result, many sub-Saharan African states today have large Christian populations.

### **Islam**

Islam came to North Africa in the seventh century. It was spread by Arab warriors and traders. By the eighth century, Islam reached East Africa as far south as the Zambezi River. It soon spread into many West African kingdoms south of the Sahara. Today, Islam remains the dominant religion across North Africa. It is also widely practiced in East and West Africa. Unlike Christianity, Islam rarely incorporated traditional African rituals and practices.

## URBANIZATION

(Insert after paragraph 1 on page 189)

Sixty-four percent of all sub-Saharan Africans live in rural areas. Nevertheless, Africa's urban population is growing at a rate of more than 4 percent annually, the highest urbanization rate in the world. The percentage of Africans living in large cities varies considerably across the continent, ranging from 10 percent in Burundi to 84 percent in Gabon. Although South Africa is the continent's most highly industrialized country, only 60 percent of its people live in large cities. This inconsistency is the result of apartheid, which restricted black South Africans' access to cities. The urbanization rate for Nigeria, the continent's most populous country, is 49 percent.<sup>12</sup>

*For more recent information, please visit the timelines at [www.southerncenter.org](http://www.southerncenter.org).*

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<sup>1</sup> Table "2.17 Reproductive Health," in "2008 World Development Indicators," The World Bank.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Population Fund, "Child Marriage Fact Sheet,"

[http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts\\_child\\_marriage.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_child_marriage.htm) (accessed August 8, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> STAT compiler (Calverton, MD: Measure DHS),

<http://www.statcompiler.com/tableBuilderController.cfm?userid=242787&usertabid=263827> (number of wives; accessed August 8, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Department of Public Information, "Africa Recovery Briefing Paper," Number 11, April 1998,

<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/bpaper/maineng.htm> (accessed November 10, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Table "1.2 Quality of Life," in *1998 World Development Indicators*, The World Bank, (Washington DC: The World Bank, 1998) and Table "1.5 Women in Development," in *2008 World Development Indicators*, The World Bank (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Table "1.5 Women in Development," in *2008 World Development Indicators*.

<sup>7</sup> Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), "2008 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic," August 2008, p 33, [http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/HIVData/GlobalReport/2008/2008\\_Global\\_report.asp](http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/HIVData/GlobalReport/2008/2008_Global_report.asp) (accessed August 7, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Tshishiku Thibangi, J.F. Ade Ajayi and Lemin Sannek, "Religion and Social Evolution," *General History of Africa, VIII: Africa since 1935* (London: Heinemann Publishers, 1993), 501.

<sup>9</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *The 2008 World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2122.html> (accessed August 8, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Table "3.11 Urbanization," in *2008 World Development Indicators*, The World Bank (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2008).