

Narrative Example: Economic History of Africa

Which historical narrative are you writing (bold the one below that you have selected!)?

Political / **Economic** / Social/Cultural

From years 1000-1400, vast civilizations located throughout Africa each created and maintained an unique economy that suited their societies needs. These societies included Great Zimbabwe, West African cities such as Ghana and Mali, and the Swahili states along the Horn of Africa including Kilwa. Each community established an economic system that was specific to each one's necessities. Whether it was trading with other countries, trade with other African societies, or wealth and currency inside the society itself, it was entrenched by these historic African nations.

Located in present-day Zimbabwe, Africa, Great Zimbabwe was a heavily-cultured, wealthily successful society first settled by Bantu-speaking farmers in the early 13th century. Being the capital of the most prosperous civilization in the area, Great Zimbabwe honored their high lifestyle and was dedicated to their culture and practices within the land. Great Zimbabwe's mass affluence is credited to the strong economy they generated. Not only did they have many partners for coastal trade, but the people of Great Zimbabwe fixed their own commerce within the society. This inner-land trade was entirely structured around cattle. The social rank of people became strictly based upon the amount of cattle one had. The more cattle owned, the wealthier one appeared. Because of this, cattle exchange in the community became central and the king paid workers in this form of payment instead of gold. Since cattle was the only thing of worth to the everyday people of Great Zimbabwe and since most citizens were farmers who did not travel outside Great Zimbabwe much, all the gold that was collected and mined was reserved for the king, in which he could use to trade with other societies and countries. Great Zimbabwe largely traded gold for ivory with East Africa. They also had

trading contacts with countries as far away as India and China, which was essential to gain access to goods they may otherwise not have access to in Africa. Through all the riches Great Zimbabwe saved up reserving gold for trade, the society was able to last for over 300 years. However, their power began to fade around the 15th century when the soil began to dry and overpopulation became a problem. Nevertheless, the legacy of Great Zimbabwe and its wealthy empire still lives on today.

Meanwhile between 1000-1300's near the Sahara Desert in West Africa, another form of trade and economy was present. With the new discovery of camels, merchants representing West African societies were able to travel through the Sahara for trade with other inland African communities. Cities such as Mali and Ghana were active and wealthy empires during this era. During this time period, salt and gold were the most significant and high demand products in West Africa. One pound of salt was equal to one pound of gold. Since the location of gold and salt mines were kept hidden in fear their value would decrease if the products became too abundant, a trading system known as the "Silent Trade" was constituted. Since the city in West Africa that produced the gold could not understand or communicate with the city that produced the salt, they would somehow arrange a meeting spot in the middle of nowhere, where one group would lay their offerings down, then walk away. The other group would then come with their trade, look what was given and decide on what they feel would be a fair amount to leave considering what was already left; then they would depart. The previous group would come back and if they agreed it was a fair trade, they would take the trade and flee, whereas if they thought it was unjust, they would just leave, indicating to the other group that they did not think the trade was fair. This process would continue until both sides felt fulfilled with the exchange and brought the goods back to their society. Alternatively, West African cities like Ghana augmented their wealth by taxing the merchants who brought in and sent out salt and gold. The cost was one golden dinar to

bring it in and two dinars to have it shipped out. All gold found in the mine was the king's possession. Without this provision, gold would be so bountiful that it would become invaluable and it would cause inflammation, like the richest man ever, King Mansa Musa from West Africa did on his expedition through Egypt. In fear of that happening, the people received gold dust instead of the actual gold. West Africa is still a popular location today, although it is very different from what it used to be from the 13th to 15th century.

All three historic African societies had an economy that was both independent within the cities and also dependent on other communities and countries. Through their economic systems and practices, past African societies existed for over 300 years. The immense success of Great Zimbabwe, the Swahili, and past West African nations are still