

## 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 fifty-three national identities have emerged, some stronger than others, is one of the success stories of the postcolonial era. This update touches on three key areas discussed in *Africa in Transition*: 1) the role of women; 2) religion; and 3) urbanization.

#### THE ROLE OF WOMEN

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>1</sup> Unfortunately, progress for women soon slowed. By the late 1990s, female life expectancy at birth in Africa had increased to only 54 years,<sup>2</sup> and in 2004 female life expectancy at birth in Africa had dropped to 47 years.<sup>3</sup> A major factor accounting for this decline is HIV/AIDS. Fifty-nine percent of those infected with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa are women.<sup>4</sup> The HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa is expected to lower the overall life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa to 44 years by 2010.<sup>5</sup>

Children are greatly valued in African societies. They are also an important source of labor and social security. In many societies, the number of children a couple has is a source of pride and prestige. Wives who cannot bear children are sometimes divorced. The pride and prestige attached to large families help account for Africa's high birth rate. On average, African women have five children.<sup>6</sup>

Africa has the highest rate of polygamy in the world. Traditional religions and Islam support this practice. 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>7</sup> For example, in Senegal, about 47 percent of marriages are multiple.<sup>8</sup> However, polygamy is generally declining across the continent, especially in urban areas. In Namibia, in 1992, 24 percent of women lived in polygamous marriages. In 2000, this number declined to 12 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Change is also taking place in other areas. 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. In urban and rural areas, 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**

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>10</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 hundreds, perhaps thousands, of traditional religions. They are influential in most African countries. For example, almost 21 percent of Ghanaians, 40 percent of Cameroonians, and 35 percent of Tanzanians practice traditional religions.<sup>11</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 63 million people and 50 percent of Zimbabwe’s 12 million people profess belief in syncretic religions.<sup>12</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. They conquered most of North Africa, and it has been primarily Islamic ever since. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia, Christianity survived and prospered. Today, 40 percent of Ethiopia’s 75 million people are Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.<sup>13</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. Today, many sub-Saharan African states 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 spread to 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

Sixty-two percent of all Africans live in rural areas or towns of fewer than 20,000 people. Nevertheless, Africa's urban population is growing at a rate of more than 3 percent annually. This urbanization rate is the highest in the world. The percentage of Africans living in large cities varies considerably across the continent, ranging from 19 percent in Rwanda to 86 percent in Djibouti. Although South Africa is the continent's most highly industrialized country, only 59 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 48 percent.<sup>14</sup>

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

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<sup>1</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>2</sup> The World Bank, "World Development Indicators 1998," Table 1.2 Quality of life, (Washington D.C: The World Bank, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank, "World Development Indicators 2006," Table 1.5 Women in Development, (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> UNAIDS, "Fact Sheet: Sub-Saharan Africa," 2006, [http://data.unaids.org/pub/GlobalReport/2006/200605-FS\\_SubSaharanAfrica\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/pub/GlobalReport/2006/200605-FS_SubSaharanAfrica_en.pdf) (accessed November 2, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> UNDP, "HIV/AIDS Statistical Fact Sheet," July 2, 2002, [www.undp.org/hiv/docs/olpubs/Barcelona-statistical-fact-sheet-2July02.doc](http://www.undp.org/hiv/docs/olpubs/Barcelona-statistical-fact-sheet-2July02.doc) (accessed November 2, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> The World Bank, "World Development Indicators 2006," Table 2.16 Reproductive health, 2006, <http://devdata.worldbank.org/wdi2006/contents/Section2.htm> (accessed November 2, 2006).

<sup>7</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 November 6, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Nafi Diouf, "Polygamy Hangs on in Africa," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 2, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Measure DHS, STATcompiler, "Number of Co-wives," 2006, <http://www.statcompiler.com/statcompiler/start.cfm?action=on&userid=186801&usertabid=203959&CFID=1879919&CFTOKEN=58334130> (accessed November 2, 2006).

<sup>10</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), p.501.

<sup>11</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Cameroon; Ghana; Tanzania," 2006, <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: The Democratic Republic of Congo; Zimbabwe," 2006, <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Ethiopia," 2006, <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2005 Revision*, <http://esa.un.org/unup>, (accessed November 16, 2006).