
UNIT 10 AFRICA*

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- learn about some of the surviving medieval civilizations/empires of Africa,
- comprehend the growth of Almoravid, Almohad, and Marinid empires in the **Maghrib** (Morocco),
- analyze the role of Islam in the formation of empires in the Maghrib,
- understand the role of trans-Mediterranean and trans-Saharan trade in the formation of empires in the Maghrib,
- know the geopolitical conditions that shaped the growth of empires/monarchies/chieftaincies in Ethiopia,
- construct the medieval history of Great Zimbabwe, and
- learn the myths current about Great Zimbabwe.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

Africa is a vast and varied continent. It is quite difficult for any historian to precisely specify the medieval period in the History of Africa. It is also a daunting task to find out a few territories which can represent the entire continent. It is further difficult to confine medieval history of a territory in its modern national boundaries. National boundaries are modern and medieval (which is pre-modern) societies had their own territorial limits. The medieval were different from the modern boundaries. Yet modern nation states have searched for their medieval roots. And it has been an imprecise attempt. Continuing this practice we will attempt to have a feel of Medieval History of Africa in this Unit by a random selection of three regions of Africa. The three regions are Morocco, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.

There are other three major regions – North Africa (Pharaonic Egypt), West Africa (Kawkaw, Malel [Mali], Ghana and Kanem), and South Africa (Bantu, Ngunis/Sans) – in present-day Africa. Keeping in view the limitations of the Course we are not going into details of these regions.

10.2 MOROCCO: MEDIEVAL EMPIRES

In the northwestern corner of Africa, Morocco, a modern nation state is largely known as a former French colony. The vast region commonly known as Maghrib, is divided into eastern and western Maghribs. Here our discussion would largely be confined to Western Maghrib and Sudan. Further down in its history, it was a land of a people called Berbers and it is so largely even today. History tells us that Berber was never a self-reference of the people of Maghrib or modern day Morocco-Algeria region. Berber was a name given to them by Greeks and Arabs. Berbers were Berber/Amazigh speaking 'tribes'. [Amazigh has about three variants or dialects namely: Riffian, Tashit and Tamazight and these are spoken at different regions of the land of Berbers. Now it is said that this language (or languages) are spoken largely in rural areas and the official language of Morocco is Arabic.] The Berbers were not a homogenous community of one language, one religion, and one kind of economic activity. They had quite different topographies and were pursuing different productive activities. Some of the Berbers were nomads and some were sedentary agriculturists. Their settlements were found on both sides of the Atlas mountains and extended southwards to Sahara and eastwards to Tunisia and towards the shores of Atlantic on the west. They fought amongst themselves as well as had intermarriages amongst themselves. Their differences should not be over-emphasized as some historians maintain that they also had plenty of commonness amongst themselves. They were broadly divided into three sets as the Masmuda Berbers, Sanhaja Berbers (among more than 50 odd tribes of Sanhaja Berbers the three dominating tribes were Bani Gudala, Bani Lamtuna, Bani Massufa with strong and powerful chiefs) and the Zanata Berbers. The various Berber tribes had their own chiefs and governing principles. Further, the Berber territory also had travellers and settlers from other communities as Jews and Christians, Sudanese etc.

In the 7th century, Islam (along with *Quran* and Arabic) reached the Berber country. A process of Islamization/Arabization started since then. Some of the Berbers accepted Islam as their religion but continued following some of their indigenous practices. This was considered 'impure' Islam and by the 11th century, some Islamic scholars, jurists and zealots thought of purifying the Berber version of Islam. The lead in this was taken by one Ibn Yasin, who had been to Mecca on a pilgrimage and had learnt the nuances of what can be called the 'true' Islam. Some experts consider this as Islamic reform movement, while others as 'Holy' or 'Religious War' or *Jihad*. This was also the process

of establishment of rule of various Moroccan Berber dynasties as Almoravids (1056-1147), Almohads (1130-1269), and the Marinids (1196-1464) in the northwestern Africa. These empires extended from southern Morocco/Ghana to **Andalusia**. We shall see how the medieval empires of the Almoravids, the Almohads and the Marinids grew in the region and how the Moroccan society and economy developed under these regimes during the medieval times.

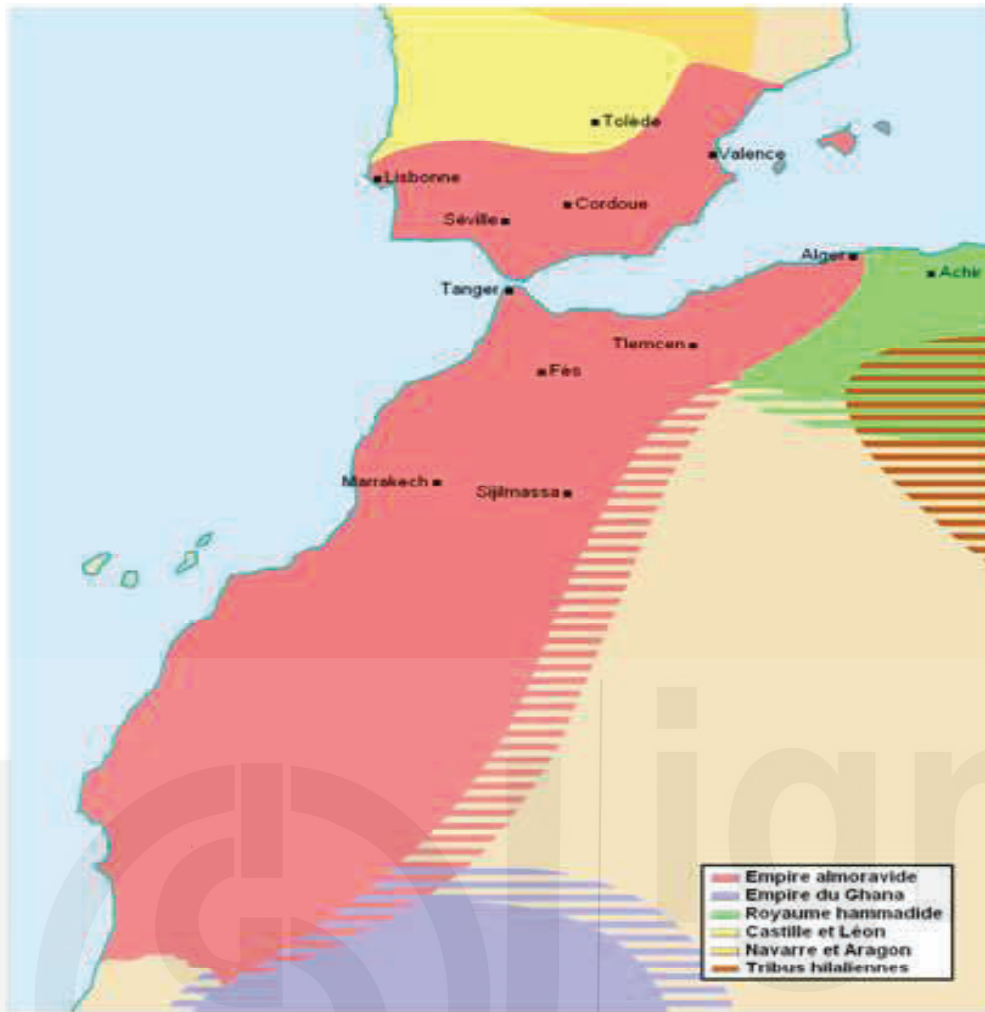
10.2.1 Almoravids

Ibn Yasin (d. 1059) was the one who established the Almoravid Empire in the eleventh century in the southwestern Sahara. He began with an objective and determination to purify Islam and to bring the Berber tribes away from their heretic or Kharijite¹ Islam and assemble them under one Arabized Empire. He was a Gazula Berber and under the instructions from one Abu went to preach Islam to the southern Sanhaja tribes. He was quite upset over the fact that the Muslims there were not following the 'proper' teachings of the Prophet or following the *sharia* — the Islamic law. He himself, it appears from sources, was puritanical and under the influence of the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence and a religious zealot. His initial attempt at purifying the existing Islam with the Gudala Berbers was not successful. His rigid interpretation and imposition of religious tenets and punitive measures only helped fan the flames of rebellion against him. The Gudalas not only opposed him but also attacked his house and he ran for his life and left the place.

That was not all. The Muslims of Sijilmasa (a prosperous town and trading entrepot on the northern border of Sahara) invited Ibn Yasin to save them from the oppressions of the ruling tribal chief, the Maghrawa of Zanata. Without wasting time he came to their rescue and took control of the town and the trade center. The people (Bani Lamtunas) of the place not only helped him but accepted him as the 'true' Imam and mobilized all their resources behind him. And thereafter he targeted Awghust, another town and trade centre of great importance on southern Sahara. And from here he never had to look back as these two trade centres provided all the economic resources he needed to expand the Almoravid empire and spread 'true' Islam.

Finally, around the middle of the 11th century, the Almoravids established an empire over the entire territory which extended from northern Ghana in the south through Morocco (Maghrib) to Andalusia (southern Spain) in the north. Under Yusuf Ibn Tashfin Almoravid power reached at its peak and he is credited to have established Almoravid empire in the Maghrib and across the strait in southern Spain. With Sudanese and Christian captives from Spain he reorganized and built his army, thus changed the tribal character of the army to a 'heterogeneous' imperial forces. His period marked the beginning of the process of rupture from the Caliphate, though Yusuf continued to acknowledge Caliph's suzerainty. The Caliph also acknowledged Ibn Tashfin's power in the region: 'I cannot live out of the desert, and I came [here] only to hand over the authority to you...' (Levtzion 2008: 334). Sanhajas enjoyed special privileges and formed part of aristocracy. They were army commanders and governors in the provinces. Thus it was not only the religious ideology which helped establish the Almoravid Empire but other factors also contributed to the establishment and consolidation of their power.

¹ Kharijite (Arabic Khawarija, also known as al-Shurah) was one of the earliest Islamic sect. They opposed Ali and his act of arbitration with his rival Muawiyah. They believed any one, not just the Quraish could be made/become Imam, the leader of the community.



Map 10.1: The Almoravid Empire

Credit: Omar-Toons, February 2012

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cb/Empire_almoravide.PNG

10.2.2 Almohads

The growing dissatisfaction to Maliki policies of imposing ‘pure’ Islam along with the Sufi influence of both al-Ashari (d. 935) and al-Ghazali (1058-1111) which condemned *fuqahas* (jurists) for seeking ‘salvation through legalistic exercises’ eased the path of Almohads to overpower the Almoravids. By the mid-12th century a *Mahdi* of Almohad, named Ibn Tumart of Masmuda tribe of Anti-Atlas, sharing the Unitarian (the Muwahhidin) school of philosophy began another religio-political movement which formed the Almohad empire and expanded further than the Almoravids, into Maghrib and Ifriqya (modern Tunisia, western Libya and eastern Algeria) in the east. By 1125 he established himself in the Masmuda territory, with his headquarter at Tinmel. Ibn Tumart died in 1128. Ibn Tumart established a consultative assembly of fifty tribal representatives, thus accommodated and allowed each tribal group to maintain its identity. However, his own tribe Harga, along with his ten closest disciples of the Privy Council did enjoy precedence. He was succeeded by Abd al-Mumin, a Zanata from Tlemcen. He was the real founder of the dynasty. In 1145 he defeated the Christian mercenaries of the Almoravids and captured Tashfin b. Ali. He conquered the Almoravid capital, Marrakesh in 1146-47. Abd al-Mumin assumed the title of *amir al-muminin* (commander of the faithful, a prerogative of the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad, a title which Almoravids avoided). Thus for ‘the first time that the ruler of Morocco came to be regarded as a caliph, a tradition which was seldom been abandoned since’ (Levtzion 2008: 342). Almoravids never expanded towards central Maghrib (Algeria). Abu al-

Mumin turned against Banu Hammad who ruled over central Maghrib and conquered Bougie, their capital in 1151/52. In 1152 he occupied Setif, followed by Mahdiya in 1160. Thus for the first time the entire Maghrib fell under the authority of Almohads. In 1184 Almohads succeeded in establishing their authority over Ifriqiya as well. Almohads also crossed the strait and occupied Spain and stopped the advancement of Christians. Thus the entire Maghrib, Ifriqiya and Spain were united under Almohad leadership. However, in turn it drained their resources. Abu Yaqub Yusuf (1163-1184) during his *jihad* battle in Spain died in 1184. Abu Yusuf Yaqub (1184-1199) defeated the Spanish Christian armies at Alarcos in 1195 and adopted the title al-Mansur. However, the defeat of Almohads in 1212 in the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa marked the decline of the Almohad power. 'The growing pressure of the Christians in Spain, revolts in Ifriqiya (increasing power of Arab Nomads [incorporated as *makhzin*] leading to clashes with Zanata and Turkoman) and the succession of weak caliphs disrupted the fragile structure of the Almohad empire' (Levtzion 2008: 344). In 1236 governor of Ifriqiya, Hafsid and in 1239 governor of Tlemcen, Yaghmorasan declared themselves independent from Almohads. In Spain also Christianity triumphed and all Muslim possessions were lost by 1276, even in Morocco after 1248 Banu Martin of Zanata was the virtual ruler and Almohad control was reduced to the capital Marrakesh when their last Caliph Idris al-Wathiq was murdered by a slave in 1269.

10.2.3 Marinids

In the mid-13th century, it were the Marinids who established themselves at Morocco, in Ifriqiya it were Hafsids who succeeded the Almohads, while at Tlemcen it were the Zayyanids who held the power. The Marinids (c. 1250-c. 1465), who were Banu-Marin nomads of the sub-tribe of Zanata, and never knew sedentary life or agriculture but depended on cattle, camel, horses and slaves, came in conflict with the Almohads and conquered Marrakesh a prosperous town of Morocco. Then they moved on to build not only the new capital (New Fez) but also an empire which would rule the land for almost two centuries.

Following the death of Caliph Said, Banu Marin Berbers under the leadership of Abu Yahya occupied Fez, Taza, Mekens, Sale, and Rabat. Fez emerged as the chief centre of their activities. Abu Yahya died in 1258, and was succeeded by Abu Yaqub Yusuf (1258-1286), who consolidated his power and occupied Marrakesh in 1269 heralding the end of the Almohad empire. In 1299 Abu Yaqub Yusuf (1286-1307) occupied central Maghrib upto Algiers and besieged Tlemcen for long eight years. Abu Yaqub Yusuf was succeeded by his sons Abu Sabit and Abu Rabi during 1307-1310, and later by his brother Abu Said Usman (1310-1331). Abu Said had to face constant troubles from his son Abu Ali who was the governor of Sijilmasa. After Abu Said's death in 1331 his son Abul Hasan, the greatest of the Marinid Sultans, finally suppressed Abu Ali's resistance and established his authority at Sijilmasa. Marinids maintained cordial ties with Hafsids, even Abul Hasan married the Hafsid princess that further cemented the alliance. Abul Hasan conquered Tlemcen in 1337. After the death of Abu Bakr in 1346, the Hafsid Sultan, Abul Hasan occupied Ifriqiya, thus united the entire central and western Maghrib under one single authority. Like the Almohads they were also engaged in long drawn clashes in Spain that drained their resources and was the main reason of their downfall. They also faced severe resistance of the Arabs in Ifriqiya. While Hafsids avoided interference in Arab internal affairs, Abul Hasan's policy of direct control brought the Arabs in direct confrontation that ultimately in 1348 led to the defeat of Abul Hasan at the hands of the Arabs near Kairouan. In 1350 his son Abu Inan, who was governor of Tlemcen, rebelled against his father and declared

independence and Abul Hasan had to take refuge in the High Atlas mountains¹ where he died in 1351. Interestingly, Marinids could never establish their authority in the Atlas region. Largely Atlas, Rif and Jibal remained autonomous. Abu Inan like his father was an ambitious Sultan, assumed the title of *amir al-muminin* and reoccupied Tlemcen (1352) and central Maghrib, and conquered Bougie (1353). However, on account of growing Arab resistance in Ifriqiya he was forced to retreat and finally got murdered by one of his ministers. Then followed the long period of anarchy in the Marinid Sultanate till its fall in the fifteenth century. After Abu Inan as many as seventeen Sultans reigned between 1358-1465 CE. Effectively Marinid rule came to an end in 1420, though the Sultanate lingered as late as 1465 as tutelary Sultans of the Banu Wattas. The constant Christian pressure and the involvement of Maghrib Sultans in Andalusia remained the chief features of medieval Sultanates in the Maghrib. However, in 1415 occupation of Ceuta by the Portuguese marked another chapter that 'inaugurated the Christian aggression on the African coasts'.

The Kubba/Koubba at Marrakesh, built in 1117 is the only surviving architecture of the Almoravids. The presence of drinking water facilities, shower, toilets connected through excellent drainage suggests that it was probably part of a larger mosque structure and used for ablution. The architectural statements of the Almohads were the Tinmallal Mosque in Morocco, the unfinished minaret of the Hasan mosque at Rabat. And these were unique features of their politics and religion. The Marinids were great builders. There survives a number of tombs, Arab baths, mosques and *madrasas*. The *madrasa* at Fez was built by Sultan Usman Abu Said (1310-1331).



Figure 10.1: The Almoravid Koubba

Credit: Kashmir, August 2005

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d1/C%C3%BApula_almor%C3%A1vide_%28Marrakech%29.jpg

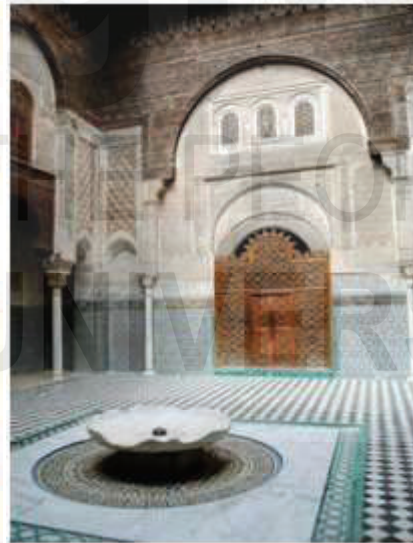


Figure 10.2: The Marinid Madrasa 1323-1325, Fez

Credit: just_a_cheeseburger, May 2012

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/09/Al-Attarine_Madrasa_%288753523807%29.jpg

Check Your Progress-1

1) Who were Almoravids? What was their religious ideology?

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¹ High Atlas mountain rises in the west in the Atlantic coast, and stretches along the Moroccan-Algerian border.

- 2) Do you agree that the Almoravid religious ideology paved the way for the establishment of Almohad power in the Maghrib?

- 3) Discuss the expansion of Marinid power in the Magharib.

10.3 MOROCCAN ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND RELIGION DURING THE MEDIEVAL TIMES

The primary producers in the Maghrib (or old Morocco) were the peasants and nomads. The peasants were producing food crops and cash crops for town-dwellers and themselves. Partly, the land was privately owned by wealthy people as the chief of a tribe, but largely land was collectively owned by peasants. Both tenant-farming as well as share-cropping were prevalent. The peasants were producing a variety of food and cash crops.

The nomads included camel-herders, cattle breeders, goat-farmers as well as foresters. These people used to move from place to place looking for pastures for their herds. As part of their periodic migrations they used to come back to the same place at a particular season. They also mixed a little agriculture along with tending animals. Their products included milk, meat, hide and such other stuffs. The camel-herders also provided not only the beasts of burden to the crucial trans-Saharan trade but also were expert guides and security-providers to the traders and travellers across the desert.

Almoravid occupation of Sijilmasa and Awghust, which were crucial trading links of foreign traders led the Sanhaja Berbers and Almoravids to gain control over the trans-Saharan route. The unification of western Sudan with the Maghrib helped in the expansion of the brisk trading activities in the region. Earlier Western Sudan was connected to the Maghrib through traders only, now with their integration in the larger Maghrib fostered trading activities in the region. The Almoravids' control of the town Sijilmasa and later Awghust regulated the gold trade between gold mines of South of Sahara and the Mediterranean markets. This provided the economic strength for building the Almoravid Empire. Almoravids minted pure gold *dinars* both in Morocco (Sijilmasa, Aghmat, Marrakesh, Fez) and in Spain (Seville, Cordova, Malaga, Almeria) which were in high demand even in foreign lands. They in turn banked on Sudanese gold for minting. Through trans-Saharan trade Sudanese gold continued to reach Almohad territories as well and under them also their gold *dinars* enjoyed the high esteem and were in great demand in Europe.

The traders were from various nationalities and each nationality had its own caravansarai (inn) known as *funduks*. There was considerable growth of urban centres under the Almoravids. The capital town of the Almoravids was Marrakesh, Nearby Awghmat developed as a flourishing commercial town. Al-Idrisi (1152-1157) praises its wealth greatly: 'no one was wealthier and in better condition [than those] under the rule of the Mulaththamun [the veiled people, the Almoravids]... Their slaves and agents go [to the Sudan] in caravans of seventy to a hundred camels, all loaded' (Levtzion 2008: 336). Another important trading entrepot was Sijilmasa. Fez was also a flourishing town. During these times the Jews and the Christians from Europe were also part of the elite high-ranking state officials in the medieval Moroccan Empires. Even Christians were employed as mercenaries. In the capital Marrakesh there existed a Christian ward and a Church. Particularly the Jews were also very successful traders. Their numbers in Morocco kept on increasing as they were persecuted by the Christians in Europe more and more. During the Marinid regimes there were anti-Jew pogroms² reported from Fez in particular. The Muslims from Andalusia who migrated to Morocco during this time were quite successful in elbowing out the local Muslims from the various offices of the state and joining the local elite. As a result of Almoravid expansion into Spain there were liberal cultural exchanges between the two. The Almoravids succeeded in establishing a symbiotic relationship between the Maghrib and the Andalusia. Spanish scholars and elites were inducted into the Almoravid bureaucracy. Building activities were largely done by Andalusian architects.

The control of the entire Maghrib and Spain put the Almohads in an advantageous position and contributed to much of their prosperity. Tripoli, Tunis and Bougie were prominent ports. Cities of Marrakesh and Fez became prosperous. A number of caravansarais were built at Marrakesh and Fez. However, Awghmat lost to Marrakesh which almost carried the major part of the trade with Sudan. Series of treaties in 1153, 1161, 1168, 1186 and 1211 ensured free access of the Italian merchants to the principal ports of the Maghrib on payments of tolls and duties. Merchants from Genoa, Pisa, Venice and Marseilles 'established their factories (*funduqs*) in the coastal towns of Tripoli to Ceuta on the Mediterranean, and as far as Massa on the Atlantic coast of Morocco' (Levtzion 2008: 347). However from thirteenth century onwards monopoly of Italian merchants got challenged by the Catalas (Spanish merchants). The Sus, Sijilmasa and Wargla were chief entrepots of trans-Saharan trade. Christian traders settled in the capital Marrakesh, lived in the same quarters where Christian mercenaries used to live, supplied wine to the militia. Jewish merchants served as middlemen in this trade. The most favoured items of exports from Europe to Maghrib were European cloth followed by grains, spices, precious stones, beads, perfumes. In return Europe received oriental wares, skins, leather goods, alum (dye) and wax. Under the Marinids importance of Awghmat declined and Tlemcen and Fez emerged as the most prominent entrepots to trade with Europe and western Sudan. Artisans of Fez produced excellent weaved cloth and the leather products to be exported to Europe, Orient and Sudan. Abu Yaqub Yusuf built a new town al-Mansura facing Tlemcen which soon emerged as prominent commercial hub, flocked with Jewish, Christian and Muslim merchants. Abul Hasan's conquest of Tlemcen first time brought the entire trans-Saharan trade's outlets (central and western Maghrib) under one single authority.

In spite of unification of vast tracts under Almoravids, individual tribes did maintain their distinct identities. Sanhajas even instructed their tribesmen not to imitate Almoravid's practice of *lithum* (veil).

The practice of slavery and racism was prevalent in the society despite the fact that

² An organized massacre of a particular ethnic group.

Islamic law never encouraged practice of racism. The slaves from Sudan were numerous in Morocco during Almohad period. The Berbers looked down upon the 'blacks' from south as non-martial, agricultural, non-tribal etc. They never used to intermarry with them and always held them in a subordinate position in society, though there were some exceptions to these. Slave-labour was used in domestic work and in agricultural production. Women slaves were also present throughout the period of medieval history of Morocco. By customary law Berbers were prevented from selling land and houses to **Haratins**. Haratins were 'blacks' or African slaves who had somehow obtained freedom from slavery. Haratins were excluded from owning land as land was the basis of social status. Historians have traced the origin of the racism and its equation to slavery to the medieval times of Morocco when tribes (Berber or otherwise) tried to maintain their (superior) status and purity by excluding conquered 'Blacks' who lived towards the south (Hamel 2013). Thus society was not free from dis-harmony and discrimination.

Religion

Almoravids were votaries of 'pure' Islam. Ibn Yasin implemented *Sharia* (Islamic law) strictly. Ibn Tashfin even abolished all illegal taxes not approved by the *Sharia*. He patronized and sought legal opinions and advice of *fuqaha* (jurists). They vehemently opposed sufism and burnt al-Ghazali's books. However, by 12th century there arose vigorous reactions to Almoravids, particularly under al-Ghazali's growing sufi influence, that led to the downfall of the Almoravids and *fuqahas* were condemned. In contrast to Almoravid philosophy Almohad ruler Ibn Tumart asserted upon the *ijtihad* (right of personal interpretation) of *Quran* and the Prophetic tradition. It encouraged the 'individual investigations' as against the 'monopoly' of jurisprudence of the Almoravids. They followed the Asharite³ and Zahirite⁴ philosophy. Unlike the Almoravids and Almohads, Marinids did not pursue any specific philosophy for legitimation. It were Hafsid who assumed the title of Caliph as 'true guardian of the Almohad doctrine' and initially Marinids paid nominal allegiance to the Hafsid Caliph. However, within thirty years once Marinids consolidated themselves the name of the Caliph was no longer recited in *khutba* (Friday sermons). Though, Almohads owed their existence to the sufi thought and the founding sufis lived during Almohads' time, it was only under the Marinids that the sufi orders (*silsilas*), particularly Qadiriya, took its shape. This Moroccan sufism became closer to 'cult of saints'. The sufi belief in 'supernatural power and a sacred emanation (*baraka*) which could be transferred by physical contact with the man or his grave' crystallized during the Marinid period. 'The saints absorbed pre-Islamic beliefs and customs. . . This new type of Berber Islam, with its more popular aspects, contributed to the Islamization of the countryside because the religious message reached the remotest Berber tribe of the mountains who had little to do with the more formal aspects of Islam in past centuries' (Levtzion 2008: 362). These sufi orders (*murabat*/marabouts) were answers to urban *makhzin* (elites) and were very much present at the very centre of every village life, playing the role of religious guides, often as arbiters. The Marinid Sultans were followers of this sufi mysticism. Sultan Abul Hasan at Tlemcen built a sanctuary of sufi saint Sidi Abu Madyan and Abu Inan built one such in honour of Sisi al-Halawi. However, in spite of Marinid inclination of sufi Islam, importance of *fuqaha* (jurists) continued. Marinids established a number of *madradas* where Maliki School of jurisprudence was taught. One such famous *madrassa* was established at Fez. The Christian Reconquista of Spain was another chief feature of eleventh and twelfth centuries.

³ Asharite School was founded by Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari (d. 936). It is one of the orthodox school of Sunni Islam which opposed the Mutazili emphasis on reason.

⁴ Zahirite school of Islamic jurisprudence was founded by Dawud al-Zahiri in the ninth century. They believed in *zahir* (outward) meaning of *Quran* and *Hadis* and rejected deductions (*qiyas*).

- 1) Briefly mention the economic structure of the medieval empires of the Maghrib.

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- 2) State the important entrepots of the Maghrib and their importance.

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- 3) List the major towns of the Magharib in the medieval period.

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- 4) Trace the transition of medieval Maghrib from 'pure' Islam to sufi Islam.

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10.4 MEDIEVAL ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia, another modern nation of Africa is on the northeastern corner of Africa. Its medieval history is closely related to the rise of Islam like the medieval history of Morocco. But at the same time, unlike Moroccan medieval history it is not a history of Islamization or Arabization of Ethiopia, rather it was a history of resistance to such processes. The Ethiopians did that by rallying round the unique church they had – the Monophysite Coptic Church.

10.4.1 The Ethiopian Dynasties

The pre-medieval Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia had accepted Coptic or Syrian Christianity as the state religion since the 4th century CE. They had built some of the most beautiful and grand churches of the entire Christian world. The decline of the Aksumite kingdom has been generally, though not universally, attributed to the rise of Islam and Arab states and the consequent loss of control of Aksumites over the Red Sea trade by the middle of the 8th century CE. Red Sea trade was a huge source of revenue for the Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia as Red Sea was at the crossroads of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean markets.

After the Aksumites the Zagwe dynasty ruled Ethiopia. With the advent of this new dynasty, the Zagwes, from the capital Axum in the north Ethiopia moved southwards towards Lasta province: Roha (present-day Lalibela) is the most referred capital. The Zagwe rulers continued the Aksumite tradition of church building and spreading Coptic Christianity amongst the tribes of southern Ethiopia. It is said that to prove themselves as ‘authentic’ descendants of Moses, the well-known Biblical figure, emperor Lalibela (1185-1225) specifically built 11 rock-hewn churches in his capital. In 1270, following the revolt of the Shewa, the Solomonic dynasty, a dynasty which claimed to have been descendants of King Solomon and Queen Sheba of the Bible, came to power. YekunoAmlak (1270-1285) was its first King. The rule of this dynasty reached its pinnacle during the regime of Emperor AmdaSiyan, who ruled between 1314-1344 CE. He not only faced rebellion from various quarters of his territory with firmness but also undertook a military campaign against Muslims and Egyptians forcing them to send a senior bishop for the church in Ethiopia. Perhaps during this time only the *KebrNagast* (*The glory of Kings*) was composed. The *KebrNagast* is a unique text. It is ‘a pastiche of legends conflated early in the fourteenth century by six Tigrayan scribes. Yishak, the chief compiler, claimed that he and his colleagues were merely translating an Arabic version of a Coptic work into Ge’ez. In fact, his team blended local and regional oral traditions and styles and substances derived from the Old and New Testaments, various apocryphal texts, Jewish and Islamic commentaries, and Patristic writings. The *KebrNagast*’s primary goal was to legitimize the ascendancy of Emperor YekunoAmlak and the “restored” Solomonic line’ (Marcus 2002).

During the rule of Dawit-I, who ruled from 1380 to 1412, the Ethiopian church itself plunged into an internal strife. It was a fight between two sets of clergy on ideological grounds. This led to persecution of one of the parties by the other which had a strong hold on the state. Despite his attempts Dawit-I could not bring the fight within the church to a close. But his successor Emperor, Zara Yakob (ruled between 1434 and 1468), who himself was trained in a monastery, could bring a reconciliation between the warring factions of the church in Ethiopia.

That was the time when the Muslims towards the east and southeast of the Ethiopian Christian kingdom were converting people to Islam and organizing small regional principalities. Ifat was one such principality and was the leading one amongst Harer, Afar and Somali. Their existence toward the east, controlling the Red Sea trade had been a constant source of tension and conflict. There were frequent raids and counter-raids between the Christian and Muslim rulers. But the Ethiopian Christian kingdom continued to withstand all that and dominate over the small Muslim principalities or shaikhdoms who were divided by language, culture and tradition. By the end of 15th century the Muslims of Ifat, Harer joined with Adal and made Adal a stronger Islamic power. By the middle of 16th century, one military leader from Adal, namely Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (or Gran, the left-handed) posed a huge military challenge to the Christian emperor of Ethiopia. In 1529 he undertook a campaign. The ruler of Ethiopia

LebnaDengel, who ruled between 1508 and 1540, could not defend his empire and sought the help of the Christian ruler of Portugal. The help came during the time of Lebna's successor, Galawdewos (reign 1540-49). Galawdewos in 1543 not only defeated but also killed Gran and restored the supremacy of the Christian kingdom.

The conflicts between the two states, here, seem more of a clash between two religions or between the two leading religious communities. Nonetheless, both, the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and the Arab-Islamic states were plural societies and were not homogenous religious communities. Ethiopia had multiple linguistic communities in it such as the Semitic (Ge'ez, Amharic and Agaw), Cushitic (Cush and Nilotic) and other tribal languages. The same was the situation of the religions too. There were tribal animistic religious practices as well as Christianity which was the state religion. There existed not only many religions but also syncretism, meaning there existed inter-relationships, influences and unclear boundaries between them (Braukamper 1992). Thus to say that conflict between the two powers was a conflict of two religions will be incorrect. Further, other than religion, there were other reasons behind the conflict, such as trade in gold, ivory, slave or even control of fertile lands, and so on.

10.4.2 Ethiopian Coptic Christianity

Despite there being multiple religions in medieval Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Coptic Christianity needs special consideration in the study of Ethiopian medieval history. It was not only the state church but also the organizer of the society and a substantial participant in Ethiopian medieval economy. There were thousands of churches in Ethiopia, hundreds of monasteries and there were thousands of priests and church officials. Kaleb, the Aksumite king (d. 540) who crossed the Red Sea to help the Christians who were persecuted by the Jewish ruler in the middle of 6th century CE, had given up the throne to become a Christian monk. There were frequent festivals and feasts organized by the church for the community.

From the 4th century we know the Aksumite kings became Christian and made the Christianity into a state religion. They belonged to Monophysite Coptic Church like the Syrians and Egyptians. This affiliation to Christianity continued with breaks during the medieval times in Ethiopia. Ethiopian Christianity was different from the Roman Catholicism. It had monastic and secular clergy. The monastic clergy learnt Ge'ez (the European equivalent of Latin) and had ascetic existence. The secular clergy used to marry and live among common Christians. And most importantly what made this church/Christianity different from other churches was the monophysite (*tawahdo*) doctrine, which pertained to the monotheism of the Old Testament of the Holy Bible, and had traces of Semitic religious practices.

The rock-hewn churches of the Aksumite and the Zagwe kings, particularly by king Lalibela (reign 1181-1221) are monuments of fame not only of grandeur and architecture but also of the times and the faith of people. A brief discussion on the rock-hewn churches will give you an idea about them. The rock-hewn churches are carved out of single rocks on the side of mountains. From Aksumite times such churches were being built in Ethiopia. But during the Zagwe times, King Lalibela got some of the best Rock-hewn Churches built. He was also known as the Saint King and had visited Jerusalem. It is said that eleven rock hewn churches of Lalibela were built as a replica of the Holy Land (Jerusalem). Carved from one single block of huge rock these were extremely beautiful. 'The roof was gabled or carved flat, cruciform or simple, invariably with an attractive cornice. Afterwards, the craftsmen set themselves to hollow the interior and to design extraordinary forms of architecture which could never have been accomplished by normal building processes and techniques. Some churches had three naves, others

five, with rows of impressive columns, capitals. Arches, windows, niches, colossal crosses and swastikas in bas-relief and haut-relief, decorative rock mouldings and friezes of geometrical shapes, apses and domes, all these and other features have truly rendered the Lalibela churches enduring monuments of Christian architecture in the heart of the African continent' (Tamene 1998: 87ñ104). There are also references, though unconfirmed, that skilled craftsmen hired for this work were brought from afar including India.



Figure 10.3: Rock-Hewn Church of St. George, Lalibela, Ethiopia

Credit: Bernard Gagnon, November, 2012

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0b/Bete_Giyorgis_03.jpg

There were thousands of churches. These churches can be divided into three major types. The most common church was the church of *venko* or *geter*. The second types of churches were *debr* churches and they were largely in urban centres and imperial towns which received much royal patronage. In these two types of churches the secular clergy (the *debtaras*) used to officiate as priests who were married men. They certainly were trained and ordained as priests and were at the same time dancers, singers, astrologers, amulet and herbal medicine-maker and scribes for the illiterate. The third type of churches were the *gedam*, which were either attached to monastery or independent, but the officiating priests were the monastic clergy (monks) who were celibate ascetics. The monks were leading a pious and arduous ascetic life. And all of them were trained in monastic order and were conversant with Ge'ez, the language of scriptures and rituals. Some monks were widower too. There were very few nuns, who were doing menial work in the churches. This church not only held the country together but it was also the pride of Ethiopia, the only country in Africa which could not be colonized by any European power.

10.4.3 Ethiopia: Land and Economy

The economy and power in medieval Ethiopia were based largely on land. Despite views to the contrary that the state used to run on revenues from trade or rather

international trade during the medieval times, historians are now converging on this point that surplus was largely generated from land. Ownership of land was individual/private as well as collective in Ethiopia.

Land Tenure

Rist was the primary land tenure in most of Ethiopia as there were regional variations too. It was a hereditary land use right with obligations to the state and superiors. Peasants known as *gabbars* were holding *rist* tenurial rights. The primary *rist*-holder or *gabbar* could pass on this right to his children without discriminating between sons or daughters. In exceptional cases, as in the case of sedition, a *gabbar* could be deprived of his *rist* right. This *rist* right could not be transferred/sold to anybody outside the family or clan and therefore, the fear of dispossession was practically absent there. There were some minorities as Muslims or cobblers and tanners who did not have any *rist* right.

The other major land right was conferred by the state on Churches/Monasteries and other collectives and individuals which was known as the *gult*. It was a service tenure granted in lieu of salary for specific services. A beneficiary of this grant was known as *gultana*. A *gultana* could cultivate the land himself or could parcel it out as *rist* to *gabbar* to cultivate and share a part of the produce. A *gult* right was not always on land. It could be over a market, over a water-body or may be on pastures. Some historians are of the opinion that *gult* rights led to creation of tenant farming or simply landless labourers, particularly towards the south which was conquered from the 13th century onwards. Here the *gabbar* was supposed to provide labour services periodically, customary gifts to the *gult* holder besides the share of produce or tribute. In fact, *gult* holder was not the only superior of the *gabbar* here. The *gabbar* had to satisfy almost all subordinate officials of the *gult* holder such as the revenue collector, the judge, the priest of the church etc. At places even the entire family of the *gabbar* was required to work for the *gult* holder.

Whether medieval Ethiopia was feudal or not has also been addressed by historians and there is a large degree of agreement that peasants in Ethiopia were not serfs as in medieval Europe. They did enjoy a relative degree of freedom of movement. Whatever that may be, the *gabbars* were producing the much needed surplus to run the state and society. The Emperor, his entourage, and armed men used to move around the country when on military campaign. They also used to move around to enforce the laws and supervise the running of the administration. (This was the reason why historians have talked of roving capitals in Ethiopia). During all these movements, the *gabbar* was the primary worker, producer and camp-follower.

There were a large number of pastoral communities in Ethiopia. Even now we have indigenous pastoralists in the lowland of northeastern, eastern and southern regions of Ethiopia. Their livelihood was based on rearing of domesticated animals. For which they made the best use of pastures and water bodies seasonally available within their limited natural environments. Some of them practiced a little agriculture also with animal-herding. They have communal ownership as well as rights of use over pastures and agricultural land. These communities and their productive practices are under threat of extinction as Ethiopia modernizes.

There was presence of crafts production in the society to a limited extent. Crafts-men and crafts-women were part of the peasant society. Long distance and overseas trade (mostly of ivory, gold, and slaves) was also a substantial part of the economy but these were fluctuating in nature as the trade routes were not always in control of the Ethiopian state. Therefore, it is opined that the Ethiopian literati and nobility were never exclusively

dependent on trade for its fortunes but certainly lived a relatively comfortable life appropriating peasant surplus.

Check Your Progress-3

- 1) List major Ethiopian dynasties of the medieval period.

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- 2) Write five lines on Ethiopian Coptic Church.

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- 3) Analyze the presence of different types of land tenures in medieval Ethiopia.

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10.5 MEDIEVAL ZIMBABWE

The hallmark of medieval Zimbabwe is the remains of Great Zimbabwe, a city that appears to have been inhabited continuously from *c.* 11th century to *c.* 1600 CE. However, it reached its peak during *c.* 1300-1450 CE.

10.5.1 The Archaeological Site of Great Zimbabwe

The medieval history of Zimbabwe centers on the Great Zimbabwe, which was a huge stone-built complex about 20 kilometres southeast of the modern town of Masvingo in Zimbabwe. At its peak the stone-built complex used to extend over more than 70 hectares of land. It is said that the building of Great Zimbabwe stone city complex started in the early 12th century and continued till 1450s. The decline of this city appears to have occurred around the 1600 CE. And now we are only left with the archeological remains of Great Zimbabwe. This fortified urban centre was placed between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers in southern Africa.

From 1550s Europeans had witnessed the ruins of Great Zimbabwe. And in 1609, the Portuguese historian Joao de Santos created the myth of this land being that of Queen of Sheeba (mentioned in the Holy Bible) who went to see King Solomon. This myth

lasted for many years. And even in the 20th century, colonial masters and the local governments stoutly denied that this dry stone town complex was of indigenous origin and design. The Portuguese traders have mentioned that it was called Symbaue (the court house) by the indigenous communities. Karl Mauch, the German geologist, in 1871 tried to verify the myth by saying that the Great Zimbabwe was Ophir, the biblical seat of Solomon and Sheeba. Many treasure-hunters went there and started digging various parts of the site in search of gold and precious wealth and damaged the site for any scientific archeological study limiting our knowledge of the Great Zimbabwe. As colonialism advanced into Africa so was their myth-making. Sponsored by Cecil Rhodes South African Company, one Brent and following him Mr. Hall manufactured and perpetuated a myth that the Great Zimbabwe stone architecture are contribution of either the Phoenicians or the Egyptians who sometimes in the history of Africa had colonized Zimbabwe and that it could never be built by the 'uncivilized' African people. Anybody who contested that and said it was the making of the indigenous people and their civilization was opposed. But in 1905, archeologist David Randall MacIver and in 1929 Gertrude Caton-Thomson stated categorically that Great Zimbabwe was built and used by African people. The Karangas built the stone edifices and Shonas who are the majority community in present day Zimbabwe are considered to be the descendants of the Karangas.



Figure 10.4: Aerial View of Great Zimbabwe

Credit: Janice Bell, July, 2015

Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dd/Great-zim-aerial-looking-West.JPG>

Now hardly any stone houses are available on the site. All that is there are stone walls as high as 11 meters winding across the plateau. Archeologists have divided the Great Zimbabwe city site into three convenient divisions: 1. the Hill, (with its Western Enclosure and Eastern Enclosure), 2. the Great Enclosure and 3. The Valley. The Hill site was on the top over-looking the other two enclosures and the valley below. Initially it was suggested that the top or the Hill site was the place of administration and royal office. But that has been disputed and many other probable uses of the site have been suggested as the residence of Spiritual Leaders, pre-marital (training) residence etc. There is no evidence of any roofs but enclosures and passages do survive. Within the enclosed spaces there probably used to be mud-houses with thatched roofs. The mud houses

were built from the local mud with gravel known as Dhaka/Daga. Walls of the Western enclosure have turrets at intervals. There are stone pillars with birds carved on the top end which may have signified individual royal figures. The western enclosure could be the house for the King and his family members or other chiefs and dignitaries. The Eastern Enclosure could be a religious or sacred place for rituals as lot of carved figures of birds had been found here. Beside this there are plenty of other archeological artifacts as glass-beads, layers of Dhaka/Daga floors, broken pottery had been found.

The Great Enclosure is the largest archeological remain of Great Zimbabwe. It is approximately a 250 meters long dry stone wall enclosure with 10-12 meter high wall. The walls could be as thick as 5-6 meters at the bottom. There were narrow passages in between the walls leading to the famous conical tower of the enclosure. The enclosure has been identified variously by different researchers as a temple, a house for the many wives of the king, a private residential area for elites of the state, and even a training center for the unmarried youths. In the absence of documentary and other sources except archaeological, there appears to be no clarity about the purpose of such a huge building or enclosure.

Beyond the enclosures was the valley where the primary producers such as cattle-breeders and peasants stayed in thatched huts. They also cultivated the land there as well as provided the necessary labour for the trade, of which their city was a part. There are also a few smaller remnants of stone enclosures and edifices in the valley.

These dry stone masonry, dry as no mortar was used, is said to have been built in at least three phases. During the earliest phase of construction, the stones were not of smooth edge. The middle phase stones were trimmed and there were ornamental designs on the walls. And in the third phase there had been only chaotic compilation of rocks and no finesse in the construction.

The Decline

When, why and how the civilization collapsed and the Great Zimbabwe was abandoned is not known clearly. Again historians, scientists and archeologist keep guessing about the probable reason for this. Some of them are of the opinion that the Great Zimbabwe collapsed by 1400 and some others say by 1500. Some specialists are of the opinion that there were conflicts over succession therefore the empire collapsed. There are others who say that the Little Ice Age had set in around 1300. This led to cattle disease and other related problems therefore the Shonas left the Great Zimbabwe. According to one belief the gradual degradation of the environment around Great Zimbabwe also contributed to the decline. The collapse of gold trade may also have contributed as by 1500 Sultanate of Kilwa had also collapsed, adversely affecting trade-networks. It could possibly be that all these factors contributed to the decline of the Great Zimbabwe. Whatever the factor may be, there is substantial evidence that the Khami state (to the west) and the Mutapa civilization (to the north) came up with the migrants from Great Zimbabwe in the 15th century CE.

10.5.2 Socio-Economic Life

The archeological artifacts which throw some light on the social life of the Great Zimbabwe are many, namely broken pottery, pieces of animal bones, and fragments of tools they used. Cattle bones have been found only in the enclosure area which possibly means that the elite living in the enclosures could afford to eat beef whereas it was not accessible to the poor sections of the society. Or again possibly, cattle-ownership was a status symbol which was denied to the poorer people. From the archaeological evidences it can be inferred that the Shona used iron, copper, gold and most certainly

knew about its mining and metallurgy. The Shonas used iron tools and gongs. Remnants of copper and gold wire jewellery have also been found. But the Karangas and their descendants, the Shonas, were largely cattle breeders. That may have helped them move away from subsistence farming towards transportation, trade and mining. We do find evidence that they were engaged in the long-distance trade of these metals through the port city of Sofala and further north of the port and the city of Kilwa on the east coast of Africa. The inhabitants of the Great Zimbabwe not only exported gold, copper, iron and ivory but also seem to have imported Chinese porcelain, Asian glass-beads and Persian bowls.

Check Your Progress-4

- 1) Discuss the spatial characteristics of Great Zimbabwe.

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- 2) What light did the artifacts of Great Zimbabwe throw on the socio-economic life of that period?

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- 3) Why was the Great Zimbabwe declined/abandoned?

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10.6 SUMMARY

The Unit focuses on three major regions of Africa – the Maghrib (Morocco-Algiers), Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. One finds that the concept of medieval is quite different in the context of all the three African medieval civilizations/empires. The Maghrib saw the intervention of Islam that resulted in the formation of three major empires – the Almoravids, the Almohads and the Marinids. Here sufism also played an important role in the change of new dynastic controls in the region and Maghrib could really be termed as one of the earliest centres of sufi activities where the famous sufi saint al-Ghazali lived. In Ethiopia it was the Christianity that played an important role in the formation and consolidation of the medieval empires in the region. In contrast to Maghrib and

Ethiopia, Zimbabwe's story is quite different. Our data and information on this great medieval Zimbabwe rests solely on archaeological finds. In the absence of any written records the civilization has often been viewed as the biblical seat of Solomon and Sheeba.

10.7 KEYWORDS

Andalusia	: Spain
Fez	: A city in northern Morocco
Fundukes	: Caravansarai
Haratins	: Morocco African slaves who obtained freedom from slavery
Maghreb	: Morocco-Algiers

10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Sub-section 10.2.1
- 2) See Sub-sections 10.2.1 and 10.2.2
- 3) See Sub-section 10.2.3

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 10.3
- 2) See Section 10.3
- 3) See Section 10.3
- 4) See Section 10.3

Check Your Progress-3

- 1) See Sub-section 10.4.1
- 2) See Sub-section 10.4.2
- 3) See Sub-section 10.4.3

Check Your Progress-4

- 1) See Sub-section 10.5.1
- 2) See Sub-section 10.5.2
- 3) See Sub-section 10.5.1

10.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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10.10 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

The Almoravid Empire (In Our Time)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNlc5QSJInY>

The Almoravids and Almohads: The Amazigh Berber Empire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qLf-riMnkQ>

Marinid dynasty

<https://youtu.be/pIpHyqLwJQw>

Great Zimbabwe - African Medieval city (Zimbabwe)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uX0VNtaCcMk>

Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNab_2rWhhQ