1450-1750: Summaries of Continuities and Changes-Over-Time

NORTH AMERICA

By the beginning of this era, North American peoples had developed unique cultures that were isolated from a global pattern of exchange. This lasted until 1492 upon the arrival of Columbus and soon-to-follow explorers from competing Western European nations. North America was greatly affected by European influence with the start of the Columbian Exchange. A need for slave labor quickly rose as the formation of a plantation economy evolved. In the beginning, Native Americans were used as laborers on plantations and in mines, but many quickly died out due to lack of resistance to European-borne diseases. The Americas began importing African slaves to fill the gap of human laborers. With the use of human labor, plantations were able to produce a larger supply of crops, making highly profitable exports to European countries possible. On the other hand, America was able to import luxury goods from other regions. The increase in crop yields made birth rates and population grow, even with the death of Native Americans, who were replaced by African slaves and Western European settlers. Another important impact of European culture on the Americas was the introduction of domesticated animals, especially horses. The animals could be used for farm-work, which increased productivity, and transportation, making the Native Americans more mobile. The introduction of gunpowder weapons to the surviving Native Americans allowed them to better resist conquest by Europeans. The English, Dutch, and French were the prime colonizers in this region as they became more established on the eastern coast and in the Caribbean.

LATIN AMERICA

By the beginning of this era, Native American peoples had developed unique cultures that were isolated from a global pattern of exchange (ex. Aztecs, Incas). Shortly after Columbus arrived in the Bahamas in 1492, Latin America was a hotbed of activity between the Old World and New World. The Europeans' arrival brought new diseases to the New World. These diseases went on to kill estimates of 50% to 95% of the native population due to their lack of immunity. This made natives an easy target for Europeans' conquest. Though native populations decreased, the overall population of Latin America actually increased due to the introduction of permanent European settlers and the import of African slaves. These African slaves were used in the production of cash crops as part of a developing plantation economy. They replaced the dying native population who were initially used as slaves. These cash crops would be traded back to the Old World where they would be sold for profit. A large mining industry also developed, primarily focused on silver, extracted by slave labor. Exports of key crops unique to the New World such as potatoes certainly enabled the expansion of diets overseas, thus creating a growth in the human population. Not everything changed, however, when the Europeans arrived. Native peoples were still based around the tribal unit and struggled to maintain their unique cultural identities. The main economy of the Americas was still based upon agriculture, although the particular crops that were produced and the manner in which they were produced altered over time. Slavery was another key continuity, though its form also changed over time from Native American forms (ex. Aztec slavery) to Western European forms of coerced labor (ex. Native Americans and Africans working in mines and on plantations). Tribute systems carried on, but altered in purpose and function.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Sub-Saharan Africa entered the New World economy through their pre-existing slave trade was increased due to new higher demands for slaves between Western Europe and the Americas. Before 1492, sub-Saharan Africa had traded slaves internally and also with Muslims through the caravan trade routes of the Sahara and along the Swahili coast. Before this era and throughout the early modern era, slaves were captured in Africa's interior and brought to external powers for trade. The new development for this era was that the slave trade expanded to the Atlantic coast of Africa and eventually exceeded that of the Sahara and Swahili coasts, though those contacts did remain. In exchange for slaves, Western European powers brought manufactured goods that were in high demand (ex. guns and rum). With the Columbian Exchange and the introduction of key crops from the Americas such as manioc and corn came a growth in sub-Saharan Africa's human population. This population growth occurred despite the loss of population due to the Atlantic slave trade. For most of sub-Saharan Africa, European incursions were minimal with one key exception being the Dutch's Cape Colony at the Southern tip of Africa. Some other things remained the same in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, their reliance on core nations and the production of low-cost goods in their interior. Traditional African family structures and social arrangements persisted as well.
INDIAN OCEAN TRADE NETWORK

The Indian Ocean trade network was first heavily dominated by Arabs and Indians, but came under threat of domination by the Europeans who first arrived directly by sea in 1498 (Vasco da Gama sailing for Portugal in 1498). By the end of this era, Western Europeans had become the dominant force in this trade network. They had established ports and forts along the Swahili coast of Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Although the Muslims were no longer dominated the sea trade, they still remained active. This trade network was not only used for trade of goods, but also for the spread of Western religions. For example, the Jesuits accessed civilizations on the perimeter of the Indian Ocean and attempted to convert the populations, but met only limited success. Hinduism and Islam were too strongly entrenched to lose many followers. Joint stock companies pursued profit-seeking activity to a growing degree throughout the era (ex. Dutch East India Co., British East India Co.).

CHINA

China, while participating in global commerce through their extensive export of luxury items, remained mostly isolated in their foreign policy and outlook on foreign nations. The idea of preserving the “Middle Kingdom” persisted. However, by the early 1500s, Europeans were directly accessing China by sea trade, beginning with the Portuguese. Jesuits were active, but conversion was minimal. Chinese emperors were mainly fascinated by Europeans’ scientific and technological developments (ex. predicting eclipses & mechanical clocks). Ancestor worship, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism continued to be the focus of Chinese spirituality. The Chinese also adopted some ideas behind European firearms. As good were being exported from China, silver was demanded in return. As a result, Western European wealth poured into China in exchange for China’s luxury goods. Imperial government regulation, Confucian bureaucracy, and dynastic patterns remained untouched and the Chinese continued to adhere to tradition. China also continued its xenophobic views and desired to protect China’s unique cultural identity, despite Western European efforts to include them in the world trade orbit.

JAPAN

At the beginning of this era, Japan followed an isolationist foreign policy. Beginning with the Portuguese in the 16th century, Europeans arrived in increasing numbers. For a short time, Japan was accepting of Christian missionaries, especially Jesuits. Christian conversion rose drastically at the encouragement of the Japanese shogun. These Christianizing efforts were viewed by the Japanese feudal elite as a way to limit the rising influence of militant Buddhists. Also, the Japanese copied and improved on firearms, which drastically changed Japanese warfare. By the early 1600s, the Japanese shogun had come to fear the rising threat of European influence and began persecutions of Jesuits and Christian converts. In the same century, Japan once again retreated almost totally into isolation, though contacts with the Dutch at Nagasaki were maintained for the sake of observing further European developments. Throughout this era, Shinto and Buddhist beliefs remained, as well as their feudal system.