

riage. African marriages were potentially polygynous (males marry more than one wife). Polyandrous marriages (a female marries more than one husband) were not common and seem never to have existed. Africans also had a system of marriage where a widow or a widower could remarry a consanguine of the deceased. Polygyny was seen as a way of ensuring that everyone in the society got married. It also helped to foster postpartum sexual abstinence to ensure the growth and development of mothers and their newborn children. In many African societies, the marriage was recognized only after the birth of the first child.

### Conclusion

Thus the African traditional family was the fulcrum around which other social, economic and political organizations revolved and procreation was central to marriage.

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**See Also:** Cities and Urban Culture; Tribal Society; Women.

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## Fatimids

The Fatimids were a Shia Muslim dynasty subscribing to the Isma'ili denomination who ruled in the 10th, 11th, and early-12th centuries over the larger part of the Islamic world. They were based first in

north Africa, then in Egypt, where they built the city of Cairo. At the peak of their power, their empire spanned Egypt, north Africa (present day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya), Syria, Palestine, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, parts of Iraq, Sicily, and northwestern India, with additional covert cells in Byzantine and central Asian lands.

Their unique institution of religiopolitical proselytizing and education was called the *da'wa*, which not only orchestrated their initial victory but continued through their rule and even after the end of the dynasty to successfully preach their creed. Claiming biological and spiritual descent from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah and her husband, the first Shia imam and fourth Sunni caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Fatimids (who also called themselves "Alawids") challenged the rival caliphate of the Abbasids of Iraq, and asserted that they were the sole legitimate rulers of the Islamic world. In the sciences and arts, administrative institutions and military techniques, urban planning and agriculture, manufacture and trade, their rule saw a brilliant cultural efflorescence that would have a significant impact on world civilization.

### Political History

Toward the beginning of the 10th century, the ancestors of the Fatimid imam-caliphs lived in hiding in Salamiyya in northern Syria. From this secret base, they sent agents (called *da'i*) to proselytize in far-flung places of the Islamic world and beyond. Their *da'wa* movement was most successful in north Africa.

In 909, the Fatimid *da'i* Abu Abd Allah and his converted local north African Berber force defeated the ruling Aghlabid vassals of the Abbasids and took their capital Raqqada (near Kairouan in present day Tunisia). Meanwhile, the first Fatimid imam-caliph Mahdi had traveled secretly from Salamiyya to Sijilmasa (in present-day Morocco) in the far west of Africa. From here, Abu Abd Allah conveyed him to Raqqada, where he received the pledge of allegiance from the populace.

Over the next 63 years, the first four Fatimid imam-caliphs—Mahdi (r. 909–934), Qa'im (r. 934–946), Mansur (r. 946–953), and Mu'izz (r. 953–975)—consolidated control of north Africa, but they had early begun to look eastward. In 914, just five years after their emergence, Crown Prince Qa'im

led a campaign to Egypt, followed by another in 918. Neither succeeded, but with these two expeditions, the Fatimids had begun to lay the foundation of a large-scale empire. Soon, however, expansion plans had to be put on hold as the four-year (943–947) revolt of the so-called Dajjal (meaning Great Deceiver or Antichrist) shook the Fatimid Empire. The rebellion was finally put down by Crown Prince Mansur—a doughty warrior and an eloquent orator—who personally led the Fatimid army against the Kharijite Berber rebels in a hard-fought campaign. While the center was thus preoccupied, the western parts of north Africa had begun breaking away. Mansur's successor Mu'izz (using the services of the able Sicilian general Jawhar) devoted the first 15 years of his reign to bringing the western flank under firm control.

In 969, Mu'izz conquered Egypt. His general Jawhar defeated the ruling Ikhshidid vassals of the Abbasids, took their capital Fustat, and built there the new capital city of Cairo. Four years later in 973, Mu'izz moved there with his books, his family, and the cenotaphs of his forbears. Under the reigns of his successors—Aziz (r. 975–996), Hakim (r. 996–1021), Zahir (r. 1021–1036), and Mustansir (r. 1036–1094)—the Fatimids extended their control over the Arabian Peninsula and much of the Fertile Crescent. The high point in their hegemony was 1058, the year they conquered Baghdad and deposed the Abbasid caliph; their rule over Baghdad lasted one year, at the end of which the Seljuks retook the city for the Abbasids. From this time on in Mustansir's reign, and through the reigns of his son Musta'li (r. 1094–1101) and his grandson Amir (r. 1101–1130), the borders of the Fatimid Empire progressively shrank, until by the time of Amir's death in 1130, Fatimid dominion was confined to Egypt. Four decades later in 1171, Saladin (Arabic: Salah al-Din) deposed the last Fatimid-Hafizi caliph Adid and founded the (Sunni) Ayyubid dynasty.

In a radical denominational backlash, the Ayyubids destroyed much of the Fatimid heritage in Egypt. However, the Tayyibi Sulayhids in Yemen and their *da'is* in India continued to propagate the Fatimid-Tayyibi *da'wa* and to profess allegiance to a concealed Fatimid imam. The Nizari Isma'ilis in Syria and Iran also continued to uphold a Fatimid-Nizari line of imams. Both these traditions continue today.

A striking feature of the Fatimid dynasty is an uninterrupted father-to-son succession (also a requirement of their religious doctrine), from Mahdi to Amir—10 imam-caliphs—for over 200 years.

### Institutions of Learning

Fatimid institutions of education and research, particularly in Cairo, were among the most advanced of their time. A unique tradition was the *da'wa*-sponsored teaching assembly collectively called the “Sessions of Wisdom” (*majalis al-hikma*) taught by Fatimid *da'is*. Sessions in which higher-level esoteric (*batin*) doctrines were taught were attended by followers of the Fatimid denomination, but attendees for sessions on the exoteric sciences (*zahir*), such as law, included students from other Muslim denominations as well. Several of these *majalis*—including those by Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 974) in north Africa and Mu'ayyad Shirazi (d. 1078) in Egypt—were collected and preserved as key religious texts of the rationalist Fatimid philosophy.

In addition to their systematic teaching of esoteric doctrine, the Fatimids were enthusiastic promoters of a broad range of scholarship. Mu'izz sponsored what has been called the first university of world civilization. Set up as an adjunct to the al-Azhar mosque, al-Azhar “University” (founded in 970) was a key locus of Islamic teaching on and off over the centuries, and it continues to flourish today. Another public educational institution was Hakim's House of Knowledge (Dar al-'Ilm), which was home to a major library and supported notable scholars of Islamic and secular sciences from Egypt and outside. Its annual endowment for lamp oil and paper and other mundane items alone (not counting professors' salaries and other “big-ticket” items) was 257 gold dinars. The Fatimid palace library was arguably the largest of the age, with approximately 1.6 million manuscripts (including 1,200 copies of the multivolume *History* of Tabari, and some rare autographed copies). These manuscripts expounded scholarship from the Islamic world and also from Greek, Persian, and Indian sources. An observatory on the Muqattam hills produced the groundbreaking astronomical tables called the *Hakimi Zij* of Ibn Yunus (d. 1009). The famous Fatimid ocular scientist Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1040) made strides in the study of optics. And Fatimid engineers worked out complicated methods of water supply and irrigation.

## Governance

Fatimid institutions of governance were similar to those elsewhere in the Islamic world. At the head of the polity was the imam-caliph. He ruled directly in the north Africa period and was aided by a vizier in the Egyptian phase. The Fatimid military was a standing professional army. Except for the Kutama Berbers who were followers of the Fatimid denomination, the bulk of the army was a multiethnic and multid denominational mix of Turks, Armenians, Arabs, Berbers, and Sudanese, each group specializing in a certain kind of warfare. In the later Egyptian period, the military under Badr al-Jamali (d. 1094) and his son Afdal (d. 1121) became extremely powerful.

Poets were employed by the state to fill the role of modern-day public relations agents. The chancery generated state correspondence, internal and foreign. Judges (called *qadis*) from the Fatimid as well as Sunni denominations were appointed to uphold sharia law. The Fatimid vizierate and the army high command—the highest offices in the land—included several Sunni Muslims, and also Jews and (Coptic and Melkite) Christians, indicating a largely tolerant regime.

## Cities

In north Africa, the Fatimids built several cities, each named after the imam-caliph who built it, which showcased achievements in engineering and urban planning. Mahdi's new capital city of Mahdiyya (in present-day Tunisia) boasted a sophisticated harbor from which the powerful Fatimid navy launched expeditions against the Byzantines and the Spanish Umayyads, and which was also the locus of a vibrant Mediterranean trade. Mahdiyya possessed a wall 8.3 meters thick with 110 towers on its ramparts, which played a key role in protecting the Fatimid caliphate from the advance of the Dajjal. Mansur built the magnificent round city of Mansuriyya as his new capital, whence he had water brought from the distant spring of 'Ayn Ayyub through an aqueduct modeled on the Roman system at Carthage. In Egypt, Mu'izz built the city of al-Mu'izziyya al-Qahira, the Victorious City of Mu'izz—in short, Qahira (English: Cairo)—in its heyday, one of the largest and liveliest cities in the world. Each of these cities had imposing forts and mosques with innovations in the design of arches and ornamental entrances, and two grand palaces, one for the reigning imam-caliph and another for the heir apparent.

## Everyday Life

The Fatimid Empire was home to a cosmopolitan world. Trade was vibrant. Sea routes through the port of 'Aydhhab on the Red Sea, Aden on the Indian Ocean, and Alexandria and Antioch on the Mediterranean, as well as the land routes of the Silk Road through the Iranian highlands to China, and the African gold route south through Sijilmasa, formed much-traveled highways to China and India in the east, black Africa in the south, and Europe and Byzantine lands in the west. High-quality gold and silver coinage was used, and the concentrically inscribed Mu'izzi gold dinar was prized for its purity across the known world.

Trade was no longer confined to luxury items (as it had been in the Byzantine-Sassanid period), and goods for mass consumption, including textiles, foodstuffs, and utensils, were exported and imported. The 11th-century traveler Nasir Khusrau (d. 1088) gives detailed descriptions of Cairo's bustling markets with its 20,000 shops, lush rooftop gardens with dozens of fruit trees in silver pots, large bathhouses for locals and travelers, and elaborate ceremonials with splendidly bejeweled royal participants. Financial services were offered to locals and visitors alike; merchants gave and took chits of credit for implementation in places as far away as Iraq and India. Arabic was the lingua franca, but several other languages were spoken and studied as well, including Persian, Turkic, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin.

Agriculture was the basis of the economy in all parts of the Islamic world at this time, but manufacture became equally important in the Fatimid economy. The production of sumptuous silk and linen textiles (particularly in Tinnis in northern Egypt), rich jewelry, exquisite rock crystal, plain-blown or stained glass, and uniquely Fatimid luster-painted ceramics were taken to a new level of sophistication. All this movement and travel and trade resulted in a mix of races, cultures, ideas, and products that made the Fatimid Empire one of the most dynamic centers of thought and commerce in the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries.

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**See Also:** Education; Egypt; Gold; Human Origins; Islam in North Africa.

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**Food**

The first major shift in the human diet was from one of mainly unprocessed plants to one with significant amounts of processed food and meat. This change came some 1.5 million years ago, before the evolution of the modern human species. These first human meat eaters were scavengers. While their hominid and Great Ape ancestors had subsisted on raw plants and the occasional meat source, early humans used stone tools to cut the meat from carcasses killed by other animals. Organized hunting and killing of animals is first attested at the east African site of Olorgesailie, dating somewhere between 400,000 and 700,000 years ago, and was first practiced in conjunction with scavenging, until human tools, prowess, and organizational ability advanced to the point that hunting and fishing could be relied on as the principal source of animal protein. Over time, in various parts of the world, hunting activity became more specialized and more skilled, though in most populations, foraged fruits and vegetables still constituted the bulk of the diet.

In Africa, the pickings for such foraged foods could be quite slim: many of the vegetables most strongly associated with African food today were not introduced until a few hundred years ago when slave traders brought them from the Americas. Key plants included various berries, roots, and tubers like the

African yam, and, once agriculture began in conjunction with the Neolithic Revolution after the end of the Ice Age (about 10,000 years ago), various cereals and grains. Though the popular mind often imagines that the hunter-gatherer lifestyle was a lean and harsh one, nomadic hunter-gatherers actually enjoyed a good deal of free time, lived free from many pathogens and disease sources that sedentary (that is, non-nomadic) lifestyles attract, and ate high-quality food rich in nutrients. The shift to agriculture and the establishment of permanent dwellings may have been an improvement in other aspects of life—safety from predators, rival populations, and the elements, and the encouragement of specialized labor—but constituted a sacrifice of food quality. For instance, in north Africa where wheat (which was first cultivated nearby in the Middle East) is the staple cereal, zinc-deficient soils can lead to nutrient-deficient wheat, which, when it is relied upon for such a significant part of the diet, can impair childhood mental development. Mitigating these losses of food quality is the ability to store food surpluses, which protects against food-impacting disasters in ways a nomadic life style cannot, and which results in surplus labor, a necessary prerequisite for human civilization.

One of the important crops in early Africa was coffee, but it is not entirely clear for how long it had been cultivated. The famous story of an Ethiopian goatherd who discovered his goats eating coffee cherries is apocryphal; there is no mention of the goatherd, Kaldi, until centuries after his discovery is said to have taken place, and it was probably a fanciful story told by or for Europeans who had recently discovered the brew. The first historical evidence of coffee is, in fact, in Yemen, in the 1400s, where it was consumed by Sufi missionaries. But all early mentions of coffee make it clear that this commodity was new only to the Arabs and Europeans who were encountering it, not to Africans, and enough of them indicate that it originated in Ethiopia that, at a minimum, this must have been a widespread belief among Africans. It must have been Ethiopian traders who introduced coffee to Egypt and Yemen (the other nations where it was especially popular when Europeans discovered it), whether or not they were the first to cultivate it. It has been suggested that the word *coffee*—which comes from the Arabic *qahwa*, via the Turkish *kahve* and the Dutch *koffie*—is itself a reference to Ethiopia's Kingdom of Kaffa, although *qahwa* is also a contraction of *qahwat*

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