African societies that were independent or autonomous governed themselves with or without chiefs or kings. Others came under the hegemony of stronger political groups in the ancient empires that were once numerous in Africa. There were differences in imperial rule, generally in the degree of independence or autonomy allowed subjugated people, as well as flexibility and liberty to preserve their cultures. At one end of the spectrum were the Asante and the Zande who adopted the “indirect rule” paradigm, allowing their vassal states extensive autonomy. At the other end were the Islamic empires such as the Mandinka, where conscious efforts were made to supplant existing cultures. Each type is now described in detail.

A. **BY ASSIMILATION**

1. **The Mandinka (Islamic) Empire, 1870–98**

   This empire, at its zenith, occupied much of what is today Mali and the northern part of the Côte d’Ivoire. The basic Mandinka stock was the Diula, who were Muslims. They were also “long-distance traders and because of the foreign goods they sold and their skill as craftsmen, weavers and blacksmiths, they moved freely throughout Mandinka country and beyond, trading among the Mossi, with French merchants on the Senegal and on the coast of Monrovia and Freetown” (Boahen and Webster 1970, 42).

   The Mandinka Empire was notable for its hierarchical structure and decentralization. It was divided into 162 cantons, each of which consisted of twenty or more villages. The cantons were grouped together to form ten large provinces. The empire was governed by three parallel lines of authority: the traditional, the military and the religious, leading to the *almani* and his State Council.

   The village chiefs were chosen by traditional methods of lineage, but their power was limited by the *almani*’s appointee. Canton chiefs were also chosen by traditional methods but held mostly honorary positions. The provinces were headed by relatives or close friends of the *almani* who was the supreme political, judicial, and religious head of the empire, as well as its military commander. He ruled through a State Council composed of the provincial heads of the three lines of authority. His rule was based upon assimilation of local cultures:
The major aim of Samori’s (the almani) administration was to destroy tribalism and promote national loyalty among the Mandinka. He did this by placing less emphasis on the village groups and more on the canton which brought villages together irrespective of their past relations. . . . Images, ancestor houses and sacred groves were replaced with mosques and schools, the major agents in creating new values and goals of the younger generation (46).

2. Eighteenth Century Zande Kingdom

This kingdom adopted a type of “mixed” imperial rule. It came into existence in the eighteenth century and occupied much of Central African Republic. It flowed southward into Belgian Congo and northward into Sudan. The ruling stock was the Ambomu people under the leadership of the Vongara royal house, which, at its pinnacle, had subjected over twenty different ethnic groups to its rule.

The grand Zande Kingdom was a collection of small kingdoms of the Vongara dynasties all of whom descended from King Ngura, the first ruler of the Ambomu people. Each kingdom was divided into provinces: the central one was reserved for the king and the surrounding ones given to his sons or representatives to rule in his name. The central province had a royal court for the administration of the entire kingdom.

The prince or governor in his province replicated this pattern, constructing a court on the same model as the royal court. A collection of villages made up a district, to which a deputy was appointed. The deputy was responsible for maintaining good order, paying of tribute in kind and labor, supplying military service, and settling disputes. Village governments were generally left unaltered.

Evans-Pritchard (1963) emphasized:

It was the policy of the Avongara not only to leave a submitted people in their territory but also to entrust authority over them to their own chiefs, demanding only acknowledgement of their paramountcy and tribute in labor and produce. The prominent commoners of Mbomu or assimilated stocks were encouraged to settle in the conquered territory, thus making for further dispersal of their clans and for intermingling of clans in general. . . . In the Sudan, there were no attempts on the part of the conquered peoples at rebellion, and their lot was by no means harsh.

What gave coherence and stability to the heterogenous amalgam of ethnic and cultural elements was the superior political organization of the Avongara-Ambomu, which enabled them to impose their language and institutions on the subjugated peoples. Nevertheless, there was a curb on despotism.

If a prince tried to exact too much from his subjects, went after their wives, or was cruel there were sanctions they could apply. They would cease to visit him at court, isolating him, and if they found that they were