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# Africa: Early History to 1000 C.E.



**Rock Art from Tassili n'Ajjer National Park in Algeria, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.** This painting might represent women gathering grain. It is one of a large group of works that were created between approximately 8000 B.C.E. and the early part of the Common Era. Although now part of the Sahara Desert, at the time this area was much wetter and supported populations of large animals (other paintings show giraffes, elephants, and other animals) and humans.

Henri Lhote Collection, Musée de l'Homme, Paris, France/© Erich Lessing/Art Resource, N.Y.

**How did changes in the climate of the Sahara influence settlement patterns and trade?**



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**WHY DID** the coastal and inland regions of East Africa have different histories?

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

## “TRADITIONAL” PEOPLES AND NONTRADITIONAL HISTORIES

People in early African societies, like people everywhere, had definite ideas about what was important in their past. They had histories. What most of them did not have was writing, and academic historians have built their craft around the interpretation of written records. African histories were generally transmitted in performances: in songs, poems, dances, rituals, and other activities that symbolically reenacted events from the past. Before the twentieth century, such performances and the artifacts they left behind (masks and costumes, rock paintings, landscapes reconfigured to accommodate ceremonies, and more) were considered beyond the purview of historians. Growing discontent with history's traditional privileging of the affairs and interests of society's elites—the emphasis on ruling dynasties, wars, exploration and invention, at the expense of describing the lives of ordinary people—eventually led historians to experiment with using different types of source material and to subject traditional documentary sources to new types of analysis.

Historians of Africa arguably have to work harder than specialists in other regions to gather the information they need, but they also have more opportunities than most academics to collaborate with scholars in other disciplines. They often call them-

selves “Africanists” or “African Studies” scholars to reflect their necessary expertise in fields such as paleontology, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, demography, and oral literature. In this they are similar to Classicists (scholars of Ancient Greece and Rome, whose training might incorporate history, ancient languages, archaeology, art history, and other fields), Women's Studies scholars (academics who examine the roles of women across cultures and whose areas of expertise might include history, anthropology, sociology, literature, and other disciplines), and Environmental Historians (scholars who highlight the role of nature in historical narratives and whose backgrounds might include advanced study in history, climatology, geography, biology, and other areas of knowledge), among other cross-disciplinary researchers.

Formal, university-based research in African history is still an amazingly recent phenomenon. In the academic year 1958–59, of the 1,735 graduate students in history in the United States, precisely one was concentrating on African history.<sup>1</sup> Within the past century, Africans were widely considered by intellectuals in Europe and the United States (not coincidentally, the same parts of the world where governments held colonies and

legislated race-based discrimination) to be “primitive” peoples whose lives were governed by the traditions of their ancestors, largely untouched by historical processes. Events of the twentieth century—most visibly the wave of decolonization that swept Africa after the middle of the century—demonstrated that Africans had a role in world history. The development of universities in Africa and the internationalization of academia in Europe and the United States have created a small cadre of Africanists. These scholars have done important work, some of which has influenced historical studies in other parts of the world, but many basic questions in African history remain unanswered. For example, fifty years ago textbooks comparable to this one insisted that “civilization” required not only population density, political organization, and writing but also the plow. In the intervening decades, researchers in Africa and elsewhere have proven that in many places, plows quickly destroy the soil; the fact that some peoples prefer hoes to plows is not an example of technological backwardness but intelligent adaptation to local conditions. As a result, this textbook and others now consider metallurgy, but not the use of plows, a hallmark of civilization. Some historians—including Africanists and also many who specialize in women,

European peasants, and other groups whose members were generally illiterate—now question whether writing is really a necessary attribute of civilization.

## Focus Questions

- ◆ What are the advantages and disadvantages of emphasizing written texts as primary sources for history?
- ◆ Think about the histories of other regions you have already studied. Have you been aware of historians using sources other than documents in writing these histories? If so, what kinds of sources have you noticed historians using?
- ◆ For histories of what other regions, peoples, or topics (e.g., history of science, art history, history of religion) could scholars make good use of nonwritten sources?

<sup>1</sup>Steven Feierman, “African Histories and the Dissolution of World History,” in Bates et al., eds., *Africa and the Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 168.

**W**e now shift our focus from the ancient societies that emerged north and east of the Mediterranean—the Persian, Greek, and Hellenistic worlds—to the world's second-largest continent, Africa, beginning with the earliest archaeological record. Africa forms the southern frontier of the Mediterranean world and connects to Asia through the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean. The human species originated in Africa. In the ancient world, pharaonic Egypt, the Kushite kingdoms of Napata and Meroe, and the Ethiopian state of Aksum were all major political-military powers with highly complex cultures in regular interchange with other civilizations, from Rome to India and beyond. The Bantu expansion is one of the epic migration stories of human history. The myriad ways Africans have adapted to various challenging environments provide researchers invaluable information about human societies. Finally, the difficulties of writing African history have encouraged scholars to reach beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries, thereby introducing valuable new perspectives and tools to the repertoire of all historians. ■

## ISSUES OF INTERPRETATION, SOURCES, AND DISCIPLINES

## THE QUESTION OF “CIVILIZATION”

In Chapter 1 we defined *civilization* in terms of a cluster of attributes—among them writing, urban life, and metallurgy—that relate to social complexity and technological development. In that sense the term identifies some common characteristics of the ancient states that emerged in the Nile valley, Mesopotamia, the Indus and Ganges valleys, and

China, and also of the larger, more complex societies that have developed since those ancient states. However, in a broader sense, the term *civilization* is associated with the sophistication of a people's intellectual, cultural, and artistic traditions. Too often we assume that societies that lack writing, cities, or a state bureaucracy are therefore “uncivilized.” Once we move outside the Nile valley and the Ethiopian highlands, most African societies down to recent times—indeed, most societies anywhere, for most of history—may not have been civilizations in the narrow sense, but they were civilized in the broader sense. African history reveals important states with writing, cities, and technology. There were, as well, many societies that were not organized as bureaucratic states with literate, urban populations but that relied on rich, varied traditions to maintain their identities while adapting to changing circumstances and shaping their own histories.

## SOURCE ISSUES

African history has flourished in recent decades, but there is still much we do not know. Written documents, the type of evidence most historians are most comfortable using, are few and far between in ancient Africa. This shortage is especially acute for the small, local societies without writing, centralized governmental bureaucracies, or large urban centers that characterize much of sub-Saharan African history.

Stateless societies leave few historical records. Local oral traditions provide one valuable source of information (see Document, “Origins of the Gikuyu”). But even combined with reports by outside observers, oral traditions can give us access only to relatively recent history—generally no more than a few centuries.

Another source for the history of Africa's states and its stateless societies is archaeological research. The tropical climate that prevails in much of sub-Saharan



**WHAT ARE** the sources and techniques used for studying African history?

## DOCUMENT

## Origins of the Gikuyu

This version of the creation story of the Gikuyu in Kenya was published by Jomo Kenyatta in 1938. Kenyatta was a Gikuyu (nowadays more frequently written as “Kikuyu”) who studied in London under one of the foremost anthropologists of the day, Bronislaw Malinowski. Kenyatta was a leader in political organizations opposed to British colonial rule in Kenya. When Kenya became independent in 1963, Kenyatta was the first prime minister, and he led the country until his death in 1978.

- **Does** anything in the style or content of this written document suggest that it is based on an oral tradition?
- **In what** ways might authoring this text have elevated Kenyatta’s stature within Kenya? Can you imagine any potentially negative consequences for Kenyatta’s authorship of this text?
- **Do** you notice similarities to other creation stories?

... According to the tribal legend, we are told that in the beginning of things, when mankind started to populate earth, the man Gikuyu, the founder of the tribe, was called by the Mogai (the Divider of the Universe), and was given as his share the land with ravines, the rivers, the forests, the game, and all the gifts that the Lord of Nature (Mogai) bestowed on mankind. At the same time Mogai made a big mountain which he called Kere-Nyage (Mount Kenya). . . . He then took the man Gikuyu to the top of the mountain of mystery, and . . . pointed out to the Gikuyu a spot full of fig trees (*mikoyo*), right in the centre of the country. [T]he Mogai . . . commanded him to descend and establish his homestead on the selected place. . . .

Gikuyu did as was commanded by the Mogai, and when he reached the spot, he found that the Mogai had provided him with a beautiful wife whom Gikuyu named Moombi (creator or moulder). Both lived happily, and had nine daughters and no sons.



**Anthropologists in the Field.** Anthropologists are trained to recognize the potential benefits and risks of interacting with the people they study.

**How can tools or information from anthropology help scholars understand African history?**

Africa unfortunately destroys many types of artifacts that survive in drier regions. Nonetheless, archaeological scholarship has brought to light many formerly unknown cultures. Some of this work indicates that ancient Africa may have had large and advanced societies and states that are still unknown. The Nok and Zimbabwean cultures, for example, left impressive but hard-to-decipher remains.

A third important source consists of the reports of outside observers. It is only after about 950 C.E., however, that we get—from Islamic historians, geographers, and travelers, and later from Europeans—much depth in descriptions of life and peoples in the vast reaches of Africa beyond Egypt, Ethiopia, and North Africa. Before this, only a few brief Greek and Roman accounts are available. These outside records are of mixed value. Greek and Roman observers and, later, Islamic and European writers brought strong biases to their assessments of Africa and Africans; their commentaries did much to form the stereotypes with which many still view this vast, diverse continent.

Because relatively little is known about small African communities that left no written documents, monuments, or other decipherable artifacts, surveys tend to focus on the larger societies with known rulers, armies, and towns or cities, which left their own records or were documented by outsiders. We shall try nonetheless to discuss both larger societies and states, for which we have more adequate evidence, and areas that have left us fewer sources.

## HISTORY AND DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

History as we know it came of age in tandem with the European nation-states. As the structure of the modern university coalesced—with knowledge categorized into disciplines and scholars categorized into academic depart-

Gikuyu was very disturbed at not having a male heir. In his despair he called upon the Mogai, [who] told Gikuyu not to be perturbed. . . . He then commanded him, saying, “Go and take one lamb and one kid from your flock. Kill them under the big fig tree (*mokoyo*) [then] burn the meat as a sacrifice to me, your benefactor. When you have done this, take home your wife and daughters. After that go back to the sacred tree, and there you will find nine handsome young men who are willing to marry your daughters under any condition that will please you and your family.”

Gikuyu did as he was directed. . . . [W]hen Gikuyu returned to the sacred tree, there he found the promised nine young men who greeted him warmly. . . . [H]e took the nine youths to his homestead and introduced them to his family.

The strangers were entertained and hospitably treated according to the social custom. A ram was killed and a millet gruel prepared for their food. While this was being

made ready, the youths were taken to a stream nearby to wash their tired limbs. After this, they had their meal, and conversed merrily with the family and then went to bed.

Early the next morning Gikuyu rose and woke the young men to have their morning meal with him. When they finished eating, the question of marriage was discussed. Gikuyu told the young men that if they wished to marry his daughters he could give his consent only if they agreed to live in his homestead under a matriarchal system.

The young men agreed to this condition, for they could not resist the beauty of the Gikuyu daughters, nor the kindness which the family had showed them. . . . [A]fter a short time all of them were married, and soon established their own family sets. . . . Thus the nine principal Gikuyu *meheraga* clans were founded.

Source: From *Facing Mountain Kenya*, by Jomo Kenyatta, copyright 1965. Published by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

ments—Europe’s global dominance in technology and economic power was so great that it seemed reasonable to imagine that Europeans had advanced to a higher level than peoples in other parts of the world. Indeed, around the time of the nineteenth-century European “Scramble for Africa” (see Chapter 27), racism combined with colonial self-interest and other factors to enable many Western intellectuals to assume that Africans (and other “primitive” peoples around the world) lived outside of historical time: Their lives were the same as their ancestors’ lives, no matter how many generations into the past one looked. Such people had no history. According to European nationalism, one of the criteria for nationhood was that a people have a shared history (see Chapter 24). Conveniently, then, Africans and other people who lacked history were incapable of forming their own nations.

There were interesting features of these peoples’ lives, however, and academics who wanted to study them. Thus was born the discipline of anthropology. Anthropology has changed considerably over the past century, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was meant to give formal structure to observations of the “Other,” of people whose lives were imagined to be utterly different from—and fundamentally unconnected to—those of contemporary Westerners.<sup>1</sup>

Anthropologists developed techniques for analyzing cultures based on people’s everyday lives, their material culture, their myths, rituals and beliefs, and other types of sources. As historians have moved beyond colonial-era paradigms, they have found it useful to collaborate with anthropologists and scholars trained in other disciplines in their attempts to understand the African past.

<sup>1</sup>See Sally Falk Moore, “Changing Perspectives on a Changing Africa: The Work of Anthropology,” in R. Bates et al., *Africa and the Disciplines* (1993).



## OVERVIEW

## Sources and Tools Typically Utilized by Historians and Anthropologists

## HISTORIANS

<b>Narrative Writing</b>	Books, letters, diaries, newspapers, and magazines
<b>Government, Institutional, and Personal Records</b>	Census data, tax rolls, patent applications, baptism records, business contracts, wills and other legal documents
<b>Other Documents</b>	Maps, portraits and other paintings, photographs
<b>Material Culture</b>	Local building styles, modes of transportation, technological innovation
<b>Environmental Factors</b>	Plagues, famines, extreme weather events (e.g., floods), natural products suitable for long-distance trade (e.g., precious metals, spices)

## ANTHROPOLOGISTS

<b>Oral Sources</b>	Stories, myths, interviews
<b>Performances</b>	Songs, poems, dances, rituals, and ceremonies (e.g., initiation rites, observances of births and deaths)
<b>Other Sources</b>	“Participant observation,” in which the anthropologist enters into events that are later described and analyzed
<b>Material Culture</b>	Everyday objects (particularly those involved in food production and consumption), shelter, artifacts associated with the practice of medicine or religion, trade goods
<b>Environmental Factors</b>	Population levels of humans and animals, indigenous plants, disease (in relation to humans, animals, and plant species), climate, water



WHICH CHARACTERISTICS of Africa's physical geography have influenced human history on the continent?

**cataract** A waterfall or steep rapids. Major cataracts on the Nile River are numbered.

**savanna** An area of open woodlands and grassy plains.

**Sahel** An area of steppe and semi-desert that borders the Sahara.

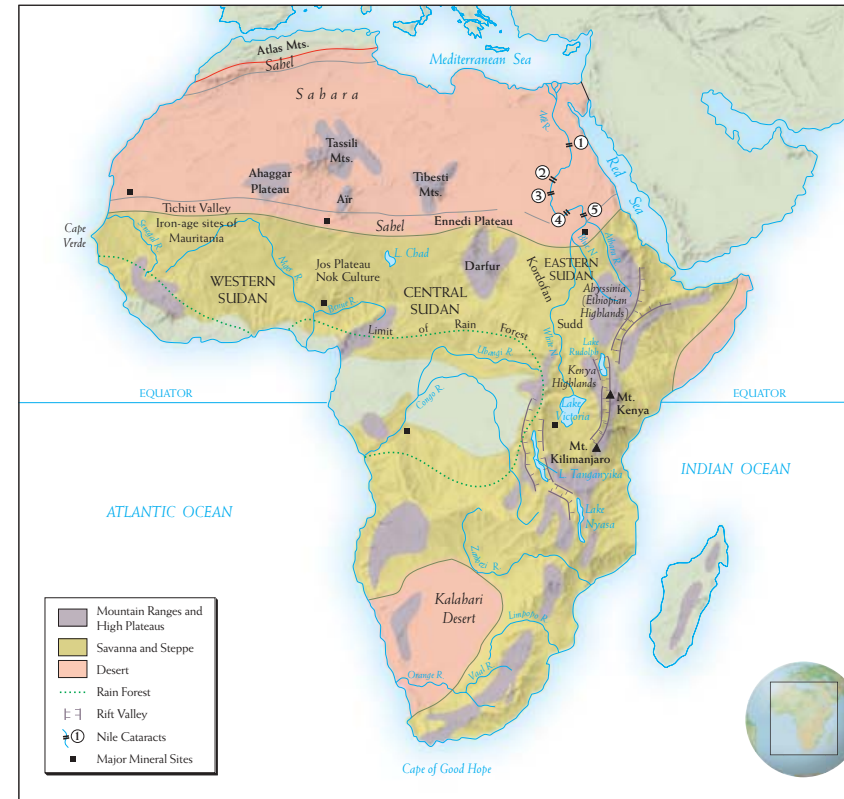
**Sahara** The world's largest desert. It extends across Africa from the Atlantic to the eastern Sudan. Historically, the Sahara has hindered contact between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa.

**Kalahari** A large desert in southwestern Africa that partially isolates southern Africa from the rest of the continent.

## PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTINENT

Africa is three and a half times the size of the continental United States and second only to Asia in total area (see Map 5–1). Average elevation is 660 meters; because steep escarpments surmount most of its narrow coasts, Africa has few natural harbors and islands. This has made communication with its interior difficult. Of Africa's major rivers (the Niger, Congo, Nile, Zambezi, and Orange), only the Nile has a relatively long navigable reach below its **cataracts** in upper Egypt. The vast size and sharp physical variations, from high mountains to swamplands, tropical forests, and deserts, have channeled long-distance communication and movement along certain corridors such as the Rift Valley of East Africa, the coastal reaches of East or North Africa, the Niger or Zambezi River valley, or the Sahelian savanna lands bordering the great equatorial forest.

The characteristics of various regions are largely the result of Africa's position astride the equator. As a whole, its climate is unusually hot. To a rough approximation, climate bands north and south of the equator on the African continent mirror each other. Over the equator, dense rain forests dominate a west–east band of tropical woodland territory from the southern coasts of West Africa across the Congo basin nearly to the Kenyan highlands. (Despite the size of this band, however, tropical rain forests cover only about 5 percent of the continent.) North and south of this band (and in the Kenyan highlands), the lush rain forests give way to the **savanna**—open woodlands and grassy plains. This in turn passes into steppe and semidesert, and finally into true desert as one moves farther from the equator. In the north, the semidesert is known as the **Sahel**. The adjoining **Sahara** (“the Desert”; Arabic *al-Sahra*) is the world's largest desert and has historically hindered contact between the Mediterranean world and sub-Saharan Africa. In southwestern Africa the desert of the **Kalahari** partially cuts off the southern plateau and coastal regions from central Africa.



MAP 5–1 **Africa: Physical Features and Early Sites.** This map shows the major physical features of the continent and Iron Age sites of the western and central Sudan.

**What patterns** can you identify in Africa's physical features? Consider comparisons and contrasts north and south of the equator and between the eastern and western portions of the continent.

Other natural factors are important to Africa's history. The soils of Africa are typically tropical, meaning they are easily leached of minerals and nutrients. Thus they quickly lose their inherent productivity. Water is scarce in most of Africa. Crop pests and insects such as the tsetse fly, mosquito, and locust have also hampered farming and pastoralism in Africa; the tsetse fly specifically has blocked the spread of cattle and horses to the forest regions. Still, abundant animal life has made hunting and fishing important means of survival from early times down to the present in most regions of Africa.





**Nilotic Africa** The lands along the Nile River.

**Sudan** The broad band of Sahel and savanna that crosses the African continent south of the Sahara.

#### QUICK REVIEW

##### Regions in Africa

- North Africa: Mediterranean coast, Sahara
- Nilotic Africa: lands surrounding Nile River
- The Sudan: Sahel/savanna band south of Sahara
- West Africa: coast, desert, Sahel, and savanna of the western Sudan
- East Africa: Ethiopian highlands, south to Tanzania
- Central Africa: Chad basin, Zaire basin, south to Zambezi River
- Southern Africa: Cape of Good Hope, north to Kalahari Desert and Zambezi River



**WHY ARE** ideas about race not useful in understanding the histories of different groups in Africa?

**An Anthropologist in the Lab.** Anthropologist Emma Mbua stands beside a reconstructed skeleton of *Homo erectus*. Where did humans originate?



Africa has great mineral wealth. Salt, iron, copper, and gold have been major trade goods from early times.

Finally, we should note that Africa is often discussed in terms of several major regions: *North Africa*—all the Mediterranean coastal regions from modern Morocco through modern Libya and the northern Sahara, including the Sahel that marks the transition from mountains to true desert; *Nilotic Africa* (i.e., the lands of the Nile), roughly the area of the modern states of Egypt and Sudan; the **Sudan**, the broad belt of Sahel and savanna below the Sahara, stretching from the Atlantic east across the entire continent; *West Africa*, including the woodland coastal regions from Cape Verde to Cameroon and the desert, Sahel, and savanna of the western Sudan as far east as the Lake Chad basin; *East Africa*, from the Ethiopian highlands (a high, fertile plateau cut off by steppe, Sahel, and desert to its north and south) south over modern Kenya and Tanzania, an area split north to south by the Great Rift Valley; *central Africa*, the region north of the Kalahari, from the Chad basin across the Congo basin and southeast to Lake Tanganyika and south to the Zambezi (or, sometimes, the Limpopo) River; and *southern Africa*, from the Kalahari Desert and Zambezi (or Limpopo) south to the Cape of Good Hope.

## AFRICAN PEOPLES

### AFRICA AND EARLY HUMAN CULTURE

Paleontological research indicates that our hominid ancestors evolved in the Great Rift Valley region of highland East Africa at least 1.5 to 1.8 million years ago. It was probably also here that, sometime before 100,000 B.C.E., modern humans—the species *Homo sapiens (sapiens)*—appeared and moved out to populate the world. In this sense, we are all African by descent.

The once popular view of sub-Saharan Africa as a vast region isolated from outside contact until its “discovery” by Europeans is incorrect. African goods circulated for centuries through Indian Ocean as well as Mediterranean trade. Archaeological research is documenting the existence and substantial internal movements of peoples—and hence languages, cultures, and technologies—both north–south and east–west within the continent in ancient times. Commercial links between Africa and other regions date to earliest classical antiquity. The geography of Nilotic Egypt allowed it to serve as a bridge between the rest of Africa and the Mediterranean and the Near East. Well before the common era, the peoples of the upper Nile, the Ethiopian highlands, and the coastal areas of East Africa below the Horn maintained contacts with Egypt, south Arabia, and probably India and Indonesia, via the Indian Ocean. The North African coast also engaged in Mediterranean trade throughout antiquity. North African Berber-speakers mixed with other Mediterraneans such as the Phoenicians. Here the powerful Carthaginian Punic state arose in the mid-first millennium, only to fall prey to Rome (see Chapter 6).



### DIFFUSION OF LANGUAGES AND PEOPLES

Cultural and linguistic diffusion shows that Africans have moved extensively around the continent. Between 1,000 and 3,000 languages can be found in Africa, depending on how one distinguishes languages from dialects. They can be roughly divided into four major indigenous language families (the Afro-Asiatic, the Nilo-Saharan, the Niger-Kongo, and the Khoisan), plus two later arrivals (the **Austronesian** language spoken on Madagascar and the Indo-European family from western Europe).

The **Afro-Asiatic** language family originated near the Red Sea. It is represented in the Semitic languages (including Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic) of southwestern Asia, as well as the ancient Egyptian, Berber, Chadic, Kushitic, and Omotic languages, all of which belong basically to northeastern Africa and North Africa. The **Nilo-Saharan** family is spread over an area generally southwest of the Afro-Asiatic group, from the upper Nile across the central Sahara into the Rift highlands of Morocco. **Niger-Kongo** languages are found to the west and south of the Nilo-Saharan group, originally from the savanna and woodlands west of the Niger bend south and southeast to central and southern Africa. Finally, **Khoisan** is a collection of loosely related languages found today in southern Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Based on linguistic and archaeological investigations, Roland Oliver has attempted a plausible reconstruction of the diffusion of these language groups. He links the development of language families with population growth, which led to larger communities and extended movements of peoples. According to his interpretation, after about 8000 B.C.E., Afro-Asiatic languages from the Jordan and Nile valleys had spread to Arabia and across North Africa. Two southward extensions of these languages likely occurred after 4000 B.C.E., possibly through the movement of sheep and cattle herders.

The Nilo-Saharan languages may have originated among fishing and cereal-growing societies in the Nubian region of the Nile and spread west into the Sahara before about 5000 B.C.E. They were later largely displaced there by Afro-Asiatic languages. Isolated Nilo-Saharan tongues such as Zaghawa or Songhay survived this influx. Nilo-Saharan languages must also have spread southeast with fisherman-farmers as far as the lakes region of the Great Rift Valley, where they were later partially displaced by Kushitic-speaking pastoralists or farmers.

The Niger-Kongo family had its homeland in the woodland savanna and equatorial forests of central and West Africa. Spoken by fisherfolk who may also have turned to farming, this group spread to the Atlantic coast between the Senegal River and the Cameroon mountains. Its largest subgroup, the **Bantu** speakers, later spread southward into the equatorial forestlands (largely as agriculturalists) and around the rain forests of central Africa (as herders and farmers) until they entered the eastern and southern savannas (see Map 5–2).

The fourth language family, nowadays called Khoisan, apparently covered most of the southern half of the African continent by late Neolithic times but was largely displaced by the migration of Niger-Kongo Bantu speakers. The varied peoples who were the ancestors of today's Khoisan speakers were likely still primarily hunter-gatherers at this time. Eventually, most of these peoples adopted the languages of the immigrant Bantu-speaking agriculturalists and pastoralists, making Bantu tongues the most widely dispersed African languages and confining the Khoisan tongues to relatively small areas.

<sup>2</sup> For the discussion of language here and later in the chapter, we rely on the summary and analysis of R. Oliver, *The African Experience* (1991), pp. 38–50, and of E. Gilbert and J. Reynolds, *Africa in World History* (2004), especially chapter 4.

**Austronesian** A widely dispersed language family with origins in the Pacific. Malagasy, spoken in Madagascar, is an Austronesian language.

**Afro-Asiatic** A language family that includes Semitic languages, Kushitic, and others.

**Nilo-Saharan** A language family concentrated in the band between the Nile and Rift highlands of Morocco.

**Niger-Kongo** A language family that originated in the savanna and woodlands of west and south-central Africa.

**Khoisan** The language group spoken by the Khoikhoi, the San, and other peoples; also, the Khoikhoi and San peoples.

**Bantu** A large sub-group of the Niger-Kongo language family; also, the people who speak Bantu languages.



**San Hunters, Southern Africa.** There are many groups in Africa with different typical physiologies, skin pigmentation, and lifeways. As with all humans, however, there are more genetic differences between individuals than between groups.

**Has race been a helpful concept for historians trying to understand African cultures?**

The development of the complex language map of present-day Africa can thus be seen in terms of ancient developments in food production and movement of peoples and ways of life within the continent. We shall return to several of these developments later in this chapter.

### “RACE” AND PHYSIOLOGICAL VARIATION

As recently as the late twentieth century, some interpreters attempted to link changes in African food production, development of local settled cultures, and even larger patterns of civilization to the apparent differences in appearance of African populations. The paleontological record consists of bones; we do not know the shade (or, more likely, shades) of early humans' skins. What little documentation exists suggests that, in recent centuries, lighter-skinned, Caucasoid African peoples have predominated in the Sahara, North Africa, and Egypt, whereas darker-skinned, Negroid peoples have been the majority in the rest of Africa. There are smaller numbers of other peoples, sometimes described as yellowish-brown, in southern Africa, most of whom live in herding or hunter-gatherer groups. These peoples are known as the Khoikhoi and San or, collectively, the Khoisan; their greatest numbers are in or near the Kalahari.

Some theories have attempted to relate color or racial differences to the development and spread of everything from language, agriculture, or cattle herding to ironworking or state building in Africa. None of these theories is tenable,

however, because race itself is such a problematic concept both in the historical record and in the scientific practice of biology. In the 1990s, there was a running dispute about whether ancient Egyptians were more “black” or “white,” an argument in which skin pigmentation was meant to signal many other attributes. (If they were black, ancient Egyptians were assumed to be somehow more African than they already were simply by virtue of living on the African continent, whereas white Egyptians would somehow have shown greater affinity for the Mediterranean world.) In reality, ancient Egypt was a multi-ethnic society, and ancient Egyptians seem to have lived among people of many hues.

The Greeks called all the black peoples they were aware of in Africa *Ethiopian*s, “those with burnt skins.” The Arabs termed all of Africa south of the Sahara and Egypt *Bilad al-Sudan*, “the Land of the Blacks,” and from this we get the term *Sudan*. Although ancient writers observed variations in skin tone, it is important to avoid assuming that they meant anything in particular by their observations. As with all historical records, these documents need to be read with attention to the authors' contexts and intentions.

Meanwhile, although skin color and other physiological characteristics are partially determined by genes, current research has found no genetic basis for the racial categories that humans have invented. There are more genetic differences between individuals than between groups.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>See Gilbert and Reynolds, chapters 1–3.

## THE SAHARA AND THE SUDAN TO THE BEGINNING OF THE COMMON ERA

### EARLY SAHARAN CULTURES

Since the second millennium B.C.E., the vast arid wilderness of the Sahara has separated the North African and Egyptian worlds from the Sudan and central and West Africa. What is hard for us to imagine, however, is that until about 2500 B.C.E. the Sahara was arable land with lakes and rivers, trees, grasses, and a reasonable climate. During the so-called Wet Holocene period in Africa, from about 7500 to 2500 B.C.E., the southern Sahara in particular was well watered. Animal, fowl, reptile, and fish populations in these periods would have allowed riparian (riverside and lakeside) communities of considerable size to live with ease off the land. Excavations near Khartoum in the Sudan support this hypothesis.

Then, starting around 2500 B.C.E., climatic changes caused the Sahara to undergo a relatively rapid desiccation, and the riparian communities of this vast territory disappeared.<sup>4</sup> By 1000 B.C.E., the Sahara had become an immense east–west expanse of largely uninhabitable desert separating most of Africa from the Mediterranean and the Near Eastern centers of early civilization. Even then, however, regular contacts in ancient times between sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean continued. Various north–south routes across the western and central Sahara were traversed by horses and carts or chariots and, most important, by migrating peoples long before the coming of the camel.

### NEOLITHIC SUDANIC CULTURES

From the first millennium B.C.E., preliterate but complex agricultural communities of Neolithic and Early Iron Age culture dotted the central and western reaches of the sub-Saharan Sudan. These peoples may have once been spread farther north in then-arable Saharan lands shared with ancestors of the Berber-speaking peoples of contemporary west Saharan and North Africa.

This hypothesis has been bolstered by the excavation of town cultures from the mid-fifth millennium B.C.E. in Mali and Mauritania. In inland Mauritania, remains of a later but still ancient agricultural civilization with as many as two hundred towns have also been found. These reflect the transition from a hunting and fishing to a herding and rudimentary agricultural society. The progressive desiccation of the second millennium B.C.E. may have forced these peoples farther south. Pottery found in the first-millennium settlements in places such as Jenne (in Mali) are clearly “offshoots of a Saharan pottery tradition.”<sup>5</sup> These migrants carried with them both languages and techniques of settled agriculture, especially those based on cereal grains, as well as techniques of animal husbandry. They also domesticated new crops using their old techniques. Assisted by knowledge of ironworking, they effected an agricultural revolution. This meant considerable population growth in the more fertile Sudanic regions, especially near the Niger and Senegal Rivers and Lake Chad. (A similar spread of agricultural techniques and cattle- and sheep-raising seems to have occurred down the Rift Valley of the East African highlands.) This agricultural revolution, completed during the first millennium B.C.E., enabled new cultural centers in the sub-Saharan regions to develop.

<sup>4</sup>Oliver, *The African Experience*, pp. 31–37.

<sup>5</sup>S. J. and R. J. McIntosh, *Prehistoric Investigations at Jenne, Mali* (Oxford, England: B.A.R., 1980), p. 436.

WHAT EVIDENCE is there that early African cultures were in contact with each other?





**A Terra-Cotta Head.** This is from the Iron Age Nok culture, which occupied what is today northeastern Nigeria from about 900 B.C.E. to about 200 C.E.

© Werner Forman Archive/Art Resource, N.Y./Jos Museum, Nigeria.

**What is the significance of continuities between Nok culture and later Sudanic civilizations?**

**Nok** A west African Iron Age culture renowned for its artistry.

Whatever their earlier history, we know that in the first millennium B.C.E. the Sudanic peoples developed and refined techniques of settled agriculture. They must have carried these together with their languages eastward through the savannas and southward, largely along the rivers, into the tropical rain forests of central and West Africa. The result changed the face of sub-Saharan Africa where small groups of hunter-gatherers had predominated. With the advent of iron smelting, these settled peoples were able to develop larger and more complex societies than their predecessors.

### THE EARLY IRON AGE AND THE NOK CULTURE

Features of the oldest iron-smelting furnaces common to widely scattered sites across Africa from the seventh century B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E. suggest that smelting was

both introduced to Africa from the Near East, via Egypt, and independently invented within the continent, probably in the Great Lakes region. It likely spread southward into western, central, and eastern parts of the continent. The western route lay between copper- and iron-rich southern Mauritania and both the great bend of the Niger River and the middle Senegal River farther west. The central route, to which we shall return, was from the Saharan mountains into northern Nigeria. In the east, there may have been multiple routes of diffusion.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the most significant Iron Age sites have been found in what is today northeastern Nigeria on the Jos plateau. Here archaeological digs have yielded evidence of an early Iron Age people labeled the Nok culture (see Map 5-1). Excavations at Nok sites have yielded stone tools, iron implements, and sophisticated terra-cotta sculptures dating from about 900 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. Scholars date the introduction of iron smelting there to about the sixth century B.C.E. The Nok people cleared substantial woodlands from the plateau and combined agriculture with cattle herding. The continuities between the Nok culture's extraordinary sculptural art—especially magnificent burial or ritual masks—and later West African sculptural traditions suggest that this culture influenced later central and West African life. Ancient communities laid a foundation on which later and better-known Sudanic civilizations may have built.

## NILOTIC AFRICA AND THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS

### THE KINGDOM OF KUSH

The lower Nubian land of **Kush** lies in the upper Nile basin, just above the first cataract (see Map 5-2). There an Egyptianized segment of Nilo-Saharan-speaking Nubians built the second (after pharaonic Egypt) literate and politically unified civilization in Africa. As early as the fourth millennium B.C.E., the Old Kingdom pharaohs had subjugated and colonized Nubia. In the early second millennium B.C.E., however, an independent kingdom arose in Kush in the broad floodplain just above the third cataract of the Nile. As early as 2000 B.C.E., its capital, Kerma, had been a major

<sup>6</sup>Oliver, pp. 64–76, and Gilbert and Reynolds, chapter 4.



**HOW DID** Egyptian civilization and the various Nilotic civilizations—Kush, Meroe, and Aksum—influence each other?

**Kush** An ancient Nubian kingdom that in some periods dominated, and in others was dominated by, pharaonic Egypt.



### MAP EXPLORATION

To explore this map further, go to [http://www.prenhall.com/craig\\_maps](http://www.prenhall.com/craig_maps)



MAP 5-2 Ancient African Kingdoms and Empires.

**What effect** did the migrations of people and the spread of technology have on early African history?

trading outpost for Middle Kingdom Egypt, sending building materials, ivory, slaves, mercenaries, and gold north down the Nile.

The early Kushite kingdom reached its zenith between the Middle and New Kingdoms of Egypt, or about 1700 to 1500 B.C.E. Kush appears to have been a wealthy and prosperous kingdom. Archaeological finds suggest that Nubian kings may have taken the gold mines of lower Nubia from the weakened Egyptian state in the Interme-





**Ruins of the Great Amon Temple.** At Gebel (Mount) Barkal at the site of Napata, near Karima, Sudan, the Napatan kings were said to have been selected by an oracle of the Egyptian god Amon, who was believed to reside inside the mountain.

Timothy Kendall.

**What was the relationship between the Napatan and Egyptian empires?**



#### QUICK REVIEW

##### The Early Kushite Kingdom

- Located just above first cataract of the Nile
- Capital Kerma was a major trading outpost as early as 2000 B.C.E.
- Reached its zenith between 1700 and 1500 B.C.E.

**Meroe** The capital city of the ancient Napatan empire, which at one time rivaled Aksum.

diate period. After the Hyksos invasions, with Egypt's recovery (from about 1500 B.C.E.) under the New Kingdom rulers, Kush came once more under Egyptian colonial rule and hence stronger Egyptian cultural influence. Then, sometime after 1000 B.C.E., as the New Kingdom floundered, a new Kushite state reasserted itself and by about 900 B.C.E. conquered lower as well as upper Nubia, regaining independence and the wealth from the Nubian gold mines.

#### THE NAPATAN EMPIRE

This new Kushite empire, centered first at Napata, just below the fourth Nile cataract, and then farther up the Nile at **Meroe**, was strong and lasting. It survived from the tenth century B.C.E. until the fourth century C.E., when the Ethiopian Aksumites replaced Kush as the dominant power in northeastern Africa.

Napata became the center of a new Nubian state and culture that flourished from the tenth to the seventh century B.C.E. as the successor power to pharaonic Egypt. Napatan rulers saw themselves as Egyptian. Like pharaohs, they married their own sisters, a practice known to many kingship institutions around the world. They buried their royalty embalmed in pyramids in traditional Egyptian style. They used Egyptian protocol and titles. In the eighth century B.C.E., they conquered Egypt and ruled it for about a century as the twenty-fifth pharaonic dynasty. They were driven out of Egypt proper by Assyria sometime around 650 B.C.E.

#### THE MEROITIC EMPIRE

Forced back above the lower cataracts of the Nile by the Assyrians and kept there by the Persians, the Napatan kingdom became increasingly isolated and evolved in distinctive ways. After Napata was sacked by an Egyptian army in 591 B.C.E., Meroe became the kingdom's political and cultural capital. In the sixth century B.C.E., it was the center of a flourishing iron industry, which may have spread knowledge of iron smelting west and south to the sub-Saharan world. The Meroitic state maintained a wide network of African and intercontinental commercial relations, and the Kushites traded widely across the Sudan, with the Hellenistic world, and beyond. The empire was defeated and divided in the fourth century C.E. by Nuba peoples from west of the upper Nile. It was replaced as the dominant regional power by a rival trading state, **Aksum**, on the Abyssinian plateau.

**Aksum** A powerful Christianized trading state in the Ethiopian highlands.

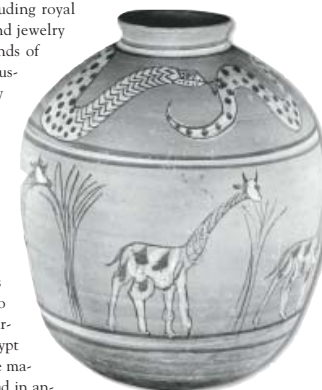


**Meroe.** A view of the ruins. Superstock, Inc.  
**What other civilization's monuments seem similar to these?**

In its heyday, from the mid-third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., the Meroitic kingdom was “middleman” for varied African goods in demand in the Mediterranean and Near East: animal skins, ebony and ivory, gold, oils and perfumes, and slaves. The Kushites traded with the Hellenistic-Roman world, southern Arabia, and India. They shipped quality iron to Aksum and the Red Sea, and the Kushite lands between the Nile and the Red Sea were a major source of gold for Egypt and the Mediterranean world. Cattle breeding, cotton cultivation, and other agriculture were their economic mainstays.

This was an era of prosperity. Many monuments were built, including royal pyramids and the storied palace and walls of the capital. Fine pottery and jewelry were produced. Meroitic culture is especially renowned for its two kinds of pottery. The first, turned on wheels, was the product of an all-male industry attuned apparently to market demands; the second, made exclusively by hand by women, was largely for domestic use. This latter pottery seems to have come from an older tradition of African pottery craft found well outside the region of Kush—an indication of ancient traditions shared in varied regions of Africa and of the antiquity of African internal trade.

The political system of the Meroitic Empire had several features that distinguished it from its Egyptian models. The king seems to have ruled strictly by customary law, presumably as interpreted by whatever clerics served the state's needs. According to Greek accounts, firm taboos limited his actions; kings who violated those taboos could be forced to commit suicide. There was also a royal election system. The priests apparently considered the king a living god, an idea found in both ancient Egypt and many other African societies. Royal succession was often through the maternal rather than the paternal line (matrilineal succession was widespread in ancient Africa). The role of the queen mother in the election appears to have been crucial—another practice found elsewhere in Africa, as well. By the second century B.C.E. a woman had become sole monarch, initiating a long line of queens, or “Candaces” (*Kandake*, from the Meroitic word for “queen mother”). The monarch seems to have presided over a central administration run by numerous high officials. The provinces were delegated to princes who must have enjoyed considerable autonomy, given the slow communications.



**Meroitic Culture.** The people of Meroe produced many examples of fine pottery. This fired clay jar is decorated with giraffes and serpents.

University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

**What were the two types of Meroitic pottery?**





**A Giant Stela at Aksum.** Dating probably from the first century C.E., this giant carved monolith is the only one remaining of seven giant stelae—the tallest of which reached a height of 33 meters—that once stood in Aksum amidst numerous smaller monoliths. Although the exact purpose of the stelae is not known, the generally accepted explanation is that they were commemorative funerary monuments. Erecting them required engineering of great sophistication.

© Werner Forman Archive/Art Resource, N.Y.

**What does this stela suggest to you about Aksumite beliefs about death?**

Beyond the ruling class, the few records available mention slaves, both female domestics and male laborers drawn largely from prisoners of war. Cattle breeders, farmers, traders, artisans, and minor government functionaries probably formed an intermediate class or classes between the slaves and the rulers. We have no direct records of Kushite religious practices, but they followed Egyptian traditions for centuries. Great temples were dedicated to Amon. By the third century B.C.E., however, gods unknown to Egypt became prominent. Most notable was Apedemak, a warrior god with a lion's head. The many lion temples associated with him (forty-six have been identified) reflect his importance. Such gods likely represented local deities who gradually took their places alongside the highest Egyptian gods.

### THE AKSUMITE EMPIRE

A highland people who had developed their own commercially powerful trading state to the south of Kush finished off the weakened Kushite empire, apparently about 330 C.E. This was the newly Christianized state of Aksum, which centered in the northern Ethiopian, or Abyssinian, highlands where the Blue Nile rises.

The peoples of Aksum were the product of a linguistic and cultural mixing of African Kushitic speakers with Semitic speakers from Yemenite southern Arabia. This mixing occurred after southern Arabians infiltrated and settled on the Ethiopian plateau around 500 B.C.E., giving Aksum, and later Ethiopia, Semitic speech and script closely related to South Arabian. Greek and Roman sources tell of an Aksumite kingdom from at least the first century C.E. By this time the kingdom, through its chief port of Adulis, had already become the major ivory and elephant market of northeastern Africa.

In the first two centuries C.E., its location on the Red Sea made Aksum a strategic site on the increasingly important Indian Ocean trade routes that linked India and the East Indies, Iran, Arabia, and the East African coast with the Roman Mediterranean. Aksum also controlled trade between the African interior and the extra-African world, from Rome to Southeast Asia—notably exports of ivory, but also of elephants, obsidian, slaves, gold dust, and other inland products.

By the third century C.E., Aksum was one of the most impressive states of its age. A work attributed to the prophet Mani (ca. 216–277 C.E.) describes Aksum as one of the four greatest empires in the world.

The Aksumites often held tributary territories across the Red Sea in southern Arabia. They also controlled northern Ethiopia and conquered Meroitic Kush. Thus they dominated some of the most fertile cultivated regions of the ancient world: their own plateau, the rich Yemenite highlands of southern Arabia, and much of the eastern Sudan across the upper Nile as far as the Sahara.

A king of kings in Aksum ruled this empire through tribute-paying vassal kings in the other subject states. By the sixth century the Aksumite king was even appointing southern Arabian kings himself. Aksum's gold, silver, and copper coins symbolized both its political and economic power. The Aksumites enjoyed a long-lived economic prosperity.



## CHRONOLOGY

### EARLY AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONS

ca. 7500–2500 B.C.E.	“Wet Holocene” period
ca. 2500 B.C.E.	Rapid desiccation of Saharan region begins
ca. 2000–1000 B.C.E.	Increasing Egyptian influence in Nubia
ca. 1000–900 B.C.E.	Kushite kingdom with capital at Napata becomes independent of Egypt
751–663 B.C.E.	Kushite kings Piankhi and Taharqa rule all Egypt
ca. 600–500 B.C.E.	Meroe becomes new Kushite capital
ca. 500 B.C.E.–330 C.E.	Meroitic kingdom of Kush (height of Meroitic Kushite power ca. 250 B.C.E.–50 C.E.)
ca. 500 B.C.E.–500 C.E.?	Nok culture flourishes on Jos plateau in western Sudan (modern central Nigeria)
First century C.E.	Rise of Aksum as trading power on Ethiopian (Abyssinian) plateau
ca. 330 C.E.	Aksumite conquest of Kush

In religion, the pre-Christian paganism of Aksum resembled the pre-Islamic paganism of southern Arabia, with various gods and goddesses closely tied to natural phenomena. Jewish, Meroitic, and even Buddhist minorities lived in the major cities of Aksum—an index of the cosmopolitanism of the society and its involvement with the larger worlds beyond the Red Sea.

An inscription of the powerful fourth-century ruler King Ezana tells of his conversion to Christianity, which led to the Christianizing of the kingdom as a whole. The conversion of Ezana and his realm was the work of Frumentius, a Syrian bishop of Aksum who served as secretary and treasurer to the king. Subsequently, under Alexandrian influence, the Ethiopian church became **Monophysite** (that is, it adhered to the dogma of the single, unitary nature of Christ). In the fifth century C.E., the native Semitic language, Ge'ez, began to replace Greek in the liturgy, which proved a major step in the unique development of the Ethiopic or Abyssinian Christian church over the succeeding centuries.

### ISOLATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHIOPIA

Aksumite trade continued to thrive through the sixth century. Aksumite power was eclipsed in the end by Arab Islamic power. Nevertheless, the Aksumite state continued to exist. Having sheltered a refugee group of Muhammad's earliest Meccan converts, the Aksumites enjoyed relatively cordial relations with Islamic domains. But Aksum became increasingly isolated. Its center of gravity shifted to the more rugged parts of the plateau, where a Monophysite Christian, Ge'ez-speaking culture emerged in the region of modern Ethiopia and lasted in relative isolation until modern times, surrounded largely by Muslim peoples and states.

Ethiopia's northern neighbors, the Christian states of Maqurra and Alwa, also survived for centuries, but ultimately the whole Nubian region was Islamized. This left Ethiopia the sole predominantly Christian state in Africa.

## THE WESTERN AND CENTRAL SUDAN

### AGRICULTURE, TRADE, AND THE RISE OF URBAN CENTERS

As Neolithic peoples moved southward, they discovered that Africa's equatorial rain forests were inhospitable to cows and horses, largely because of the animals' inability to survive the sleeping sickness (**trypanosomiasis**) carried by the tsetse fly. But the agriculturalists who brought their cereal grains and stone tools south found particularly good conditions in the savanna just north of the West African forests. By the first or second century C.E., settled agriculture, augmented by iron tools, had become the way of life of most inhabitants of the western Sudan; it had even progressed in the forest regions farther south. The savanna areas seem to have experienced a population explosion in the first few centuries C.E., especially around the Senegal River, the great

**Monophysite** Adhering to the dogma of the single, unitary nature of Christ (in opposition to the orthodox doctrine that Christ had two natures: human and divine).

**WHAT ROLE** did trade play in the rise of large political entities in the western and central Sudan?



**trypanosomiasis** Sleeping sickness, a parasitic disease that is transmitted by tsetse flies. If untreated, it is fatal both to humans and animals.



**A Camel Caravan Crossing the Sahara.** The use of the camel as a beast of burden from the first century C.E. onward greatly increased trans-Saharan trade.

© Michael S. Lewis/Corbis.

Why was the camel important to trade in Africa?



northern bend in the Niger River, and Lake Chad. Villages, and chiefdoms of several villages, were the largest political units. As time went on, larger towns and political units developed in the western Sudan.

Regional and interregional trade networks in the western and central Sudan date to ancient times; trans-Saharan trading routes were maintained throughout the first millennium B.C.E. Urban settlements—such as Gao, Kumbi (or Kumbi Saleh), and Jenne—emerged in the western Sahel. Excavations at Jenne in the upper Niger indicate that it dates from 250 B.C.E. and had a population of more than ten thousand by the late first millennium C.E.<sup>7</sup>

These and other early urbanized areas combined farming with fishing and hunting, and all developed in oasis or river regions rich enough to support dense populations and trade. The existence of relatively autonomous settlements made possible loose confederations or even imperial networks as time went on.

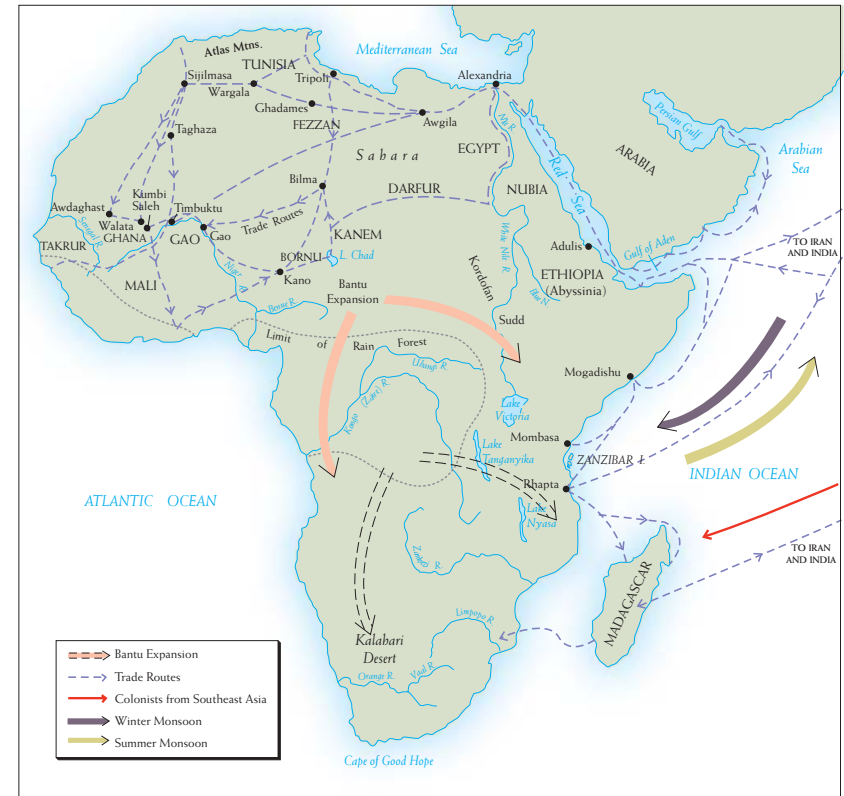
The introduction of the domesticated camel (the one-humped Arabian camel, or dromedary) from the east around the beginning of the Common Era increased trans-Saharan trade. By the early centuries C.E. the West African settled communities had developed important trading centers on their northern peripheries in the Sahel near the edge of the true desert. The salt of the desert, so badly needed in the settled savanna, and the gold of West Africa, coveted in the north, were the prime trade commodities. Many other items were also

## CHRONOLOGY

### NILOTIC AFRICA AND THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS

ca. 500 B.C.E.	Yemenites (southern Arabians) enter and settle on the Ethiopian plateau
30 B.C.E.	Egypt becomes part of Roman Empire of Octavian
ca. 1–100 C.E.	Earliest mention (in Latin and Greek writers) of the kingdom of Aksum on Ethiopian plateau
ca. 330 C.E.	Fall of Kushite Empire to Ezana of Aksum
ca. 200–400 C.E.	Heyday of Aksumite Ethiopia
ca. 500–600 C.E.	Christianizing of the major Nubian states of Maqurra and Alwa
652 C.E.	Maqurra and Alwa make peace with Arab Muslim armies from Egypt

<sup>7</sup>S. J. and R. J. McIntosh, pp. 41–59, 434–461; and R. Oliver, p. 90. The ensuing discussion of West African urban settlement is taken primarily from Oliver's excellent summary, *ibid.*, pp. 90–101.



**MAP 5-3 Africa: Early Trade Routes and Early States of the Western and Central Sudan.** This map shows some of the major routes of north-south trans-Saharan caravan trade and their links with Egypt and with Sudanic and forest regions of West Africa.

**How did** Africa's geography help determine its trade routes?

traded, including cola nuts, slaves, dates, and gum from West Africa, and horses, cattle, millet, leather, cloth, and weapons from the north. Towns such as Awdaghast, Walata, Timbuktu, Gao, Tadmekka, and Agades were the most famous southern middlemen who plied the desert routes to cross the perilous Sahara via oasis stations en route to the North African coasts or even Egypt. This was not an easy means of transporting goods; a typical crossing could take two to three months.

### QUICK REVIEW

#### Trade

- Trade contributed to rise of larger political entities
- Regional and interregional trade networks date to ancient times
- Trade routes connected western and central Sudan with Egypt



### FORMATION OF SUDANIC KINGDOMS IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

The growth of settled agricultural populations and the expansion of trade coincided with the rise of sizable states in the western and central Sudan. The most important states were located in Takrur on the Senegal River, from perhaps the fifth century, if not earlier; Ghana, between the northern bends of the Senegal and the Niger, from the fifth or sixth century; Gao, on the Niger southeast of the great bend, from before the eighth century; and Kanem, northeast of Lake Chad, from the eighth or ninth century. Although the origins and even the full extent of the major states in these areas are obscure, each represents only the first of a series of large political entities in its region. All continued to figure prominently in subsequent West African history (see Chapter 17).

The states developed by the Fulbe people of Takrur and the Soninke people of Ghana depended on their ability to draw gold from the savanna region west of the upper Senegal into the trans-Saharan trade. Of all the sub-Saharan kingdoms of the late first millennium, Ghana was the most famous outside of the region, largely because of its control of the gold trade. Its people built a large regional empire centered at its capital, Kumbi Saleh. Inheriting his throne by matrilineal descent, the ruler was treated as a semidivine personage whose interaction with his subjects was mediated by a hierarchy of government ministers. An eleventh-century Arabic chronicle describes



The Ruins of Kumbi Saleh belie its former glory when it housed between 15,000 to 20,000 people. How did the Soninke people of Ghana gain power?



him as commanding a sizable army, including horsemen and archers, and being buried with his retainers under a dome of earth and wood. In contrast to the Soninke of Ghana, the Songhai rulers of Gao had no gold trade until the fourteenth century. Gao was oriented in its forest trade toward the lower Niger basin and in its Saharan trade toward eastern Algeria.

All of these states were based on agriculture and settled populations. By contrast, the power of Kanem, on the northwestern side of Lake Chad, originated in the borderlands of the central Sudan and southern Sahara with a nomadic federation of tribal peoples that persisted long enough for the separate tribes to merge and form a single people, the Kanuri. They then moved south to take over the sedentary societies of Kanem proper, just east of Lake Chad, and later, Bornu, west of Lake Chad. By the thirteenth century the Kanuri had themselves become sedentary. Their kingdom controlled the southern terminus of perhaps the best trans-Saharan route—that running north via good watering stations to the oasis region of Fezzan in modern central Libya and thence to the Mediterranean. (We shall return to the later development of Kanem and the western Sudanic states in Chapter 15.)

#### QUICK REVIEW

##### Ghana and Gold

- The people of Ghana depended on gold for Saharan trade
- Ghana was famous outside the region for control of gold
- Ruler of region inherited throne through matrilineal descent

#### CHRONOLOGY

##### THE WESTERN AND CENTRAL SUDAN: PROBABLE DATES FOR FOUNDING OF REGIONAL KINGDOMS

ca. 400 C.E.	Takrur (Senegal River valley)
400–600 C.E.	Ghana (in Sahel between great northern bends of the Senegal and Niger Rivers)
ca. 700–800 C.E.	Gao (on the Niger River southeast of great bend)
ca. 700–900 C.E.	Kanem (northeast of Lake Chad)

## CENTRAL, SOUTHERN, AND EAST AFRICA

The African subcontinent is that part of central, southern, and East Africa that lies south of a line from roughly the Niger Delta and Cameroon across to southern Somalia on the east coast.

**WHY DID** the coastal and inland regions of East Africa have different histories?



### BANTU EXPANSION AND DIFFUSION

In the southern subcontinent, most people speak one of more than four hundred languages that belong to a single language group known as Bantu, a subgroup of the Niger-Congo language family. All Bantu languages are as closely related as are the Germanic or Romance tongues of Europe. The proto-Bantu language probably arose south of the Benue River in eastern Nigeria and modern Cameroon. During the latter centuries B.C.E. and the first century C.E., migrations of Bantu-speaking peoples carried their languages in two basic directions: (1) south into the lower Congo basin and ultimately to the southern edge of the equatorial forest in present-day northern Katanga; and (2) east around the equatorial forests into the lakes of highland East Africa (see Map 5–3).

In all these regions, Bantu tongues developed and multiplied in contact with other languages. Likewise, Bantu speakers intermixed and adapted in diverse ways. Further migrations, some perhaps as late as the eleventh century, dispersed Bantu peoples even more widely, into south-central Africa, coastal East Africa, and southern Africa. This dispersion led to the early civilization of “Great Zimbabwe” and Mapungubwe in the upper Limpopo region (treated in Chapter 17).

How the Bantu peoples imposed their languages on the earlier cultures of these regions remains unexplained. The proto-Bantu had apparently been fishermen and hunters who also cultivated yams, date palms, and cereals. They raised goats and





**Cave Painting from Namibia** from at least 15,000 B.C.E., depicting rhinoceroses, giraffes, antelope, and zebra.

What do these images suggest to you about the importance of animals to the artist?



possibly sheep and cattle, but they did not bring cattle with them in their migrations. Most of the migrating Bantus seem to have been mainly cereal farmers whose basic political and social unit was the village. Perhaps they had unusually strong social cohesion, which allowed them to absorb other peoples; they were apparently not military conquerors. Possibly they simply had sufficient numbers to become dominant, or they may have brought diseases with them against which the aboriginals of the forests and southern savanna had no immunities. Eventually Bantu cultures became fully interwoven with those of the peoples among whom they settled. Bantu-Arab mixing on the eastern coasts produced the Swahili culture (see Chapter 15).

### THE KHOISAN AND TWA PEOPLES

A minority of southern Africans speak “Khoisan.” The main two peoples that constitute the Khoisan are the San and the Khoikhoi. (Westerners used to refer to these groups as “Bushmen” and “Hottentots,” but these names are considered offensive.) At one time, observers believed that the Khoikhoi and the San could be distinguished from each other largely by their livelihood.<sup>8</sup> The Khoikhoi were labeled as herdsmen and the San as hunter-gatherers, but more recent research has challenged this. Both groups were also long seen as surviving representatives of a “primitive” stage of cultural evolution, but anthropologists and historians now reject the very notion of cultural evolution. Scholars today recognize that much of the common wisdom about these peoples results from colonialist and postcolonial prejudice, the same prejudice that accounts for the Khoisan’s low social and economic status in contemporary Africa.

<sup>8</sup>On distinctions between San and Khoikhoi, see Richard Elphick, *Kraal and Castle: Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. xxi–xxii, 3–42; on the “construction” of their respective identities and for a summary of research on their antiquity and history, see E. N. Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Note also that the once widely held notion that the Bantu and the Khoikhoi arrived in southern Africa at about the same time as the first European settlers was a fabrication to justify apartheid (see Chapter 34).



The San are likely the descendants of the Neolithic and Early Iron Age peoples who created the striking prehistoric rock paintings of southern Africa. They have developed linguistically and culturally diverse subgroups across southern Africa. Today they survive most prominently in the Kalahari region. The more homogeneous Khoikhoi were generally sheep- and cattle-herding pastoralists scattered across the south, speaking closely related Khoisan tongues. Their ancestors probably originated in northern Botswana. They were hunters who relatively late—likely between 700 and 1000 C.E.—adopted animal herding from their Bantu-speaking southern African neighbors. Thus they became primarily pastoralists and soon expanded as far south as the Cape of Good Hope. Here they flourished as pastoralist clans, until their tragic encounter with the invading Dutch colonists in the mid-seventeenth century, which resulted in their demise as a distinct people.

Sandwe, a Khoisan language, is spoken by foraging groups in Tanzania, and small foraging groups in Kenya speak similar languages. Members of these groups are probably, like the Khoikhoi and San peoples in southern Africa, remnants of groups that inhabited East Africa prior to the arrival of the Bantu. In the central African rain forests, the Twa people (commonly referred to in the West as “Pygmies”) speak Bantu languages but show other links to the Khoisan. They too are probably descendants of a population that preceded the Bantu migration.

### EAST AFRICA

The history of East Africa along the coast before Islam differed from that of the inland highlands. Long-distance travel was easy and common along the seashore but less so inland. The coast had been in maritime contact with India, Arabia, and the Mediterranean via the Indian Ocean and Red Sea trade routes from at least the second century B.C.E. By contrast, we know little about the long-distance contacts of inland regions with the coastal areas until after 1000 C.E. Nonetheless, both regional inland and coastal trade must be ancient. Both coastal and overseas trade remained important and



**The Great Mosque at Kilwa**, ca. 1100 C.E. The Swahili city of Kilwa, on the coast of present-day Tanzania, was likely founded by Muslim traders with strong links to the Indian Ocean world. The insides of its domes were lined with Chinese porcelain. Now in ruins, this large congregational mosque was probably in its day the largest fully enclosed structure in sub-Saharan Africa. How did trade across the Indian Ocean influence history in East Africa?





## CHRONOLOGY

### MOVEMENT AND CONTACT OF PEOPLES IN CENTRAL, SOUTHERN, AND EAST AFRICA

ca. 1300–1000 B.C.E.	Kushitic-speaking peoples migrate from Ethiopian plateau south along Rift Valley
ca. 400 B.C.E.–400 C.E.	Probable era of major Bantu migrations into central, southeastern, and East Africa
200–100 B.C.E.	East African coast becomes involved in Indian Ocean trade
ca. 100 B.C.E.	Probable time of first Indonesian immigration to East African coast
ca. 100–1500 C.E.	Nilotic-speaking peoples spread over upper Nile valley; Nilotic peoples spread over Rift Valley region

interdependent over the centuries, because the Indian Ocean trade depended on the monsoon winds and could use only the northernmost coastal trading harbors of East Africa for round-trip voyages in the same year. The monsoon winds blow from the northeast from December to March and thus can carry sailing ships south from Iran, Arabia, and India only during those months; they blow from the southwest from April to August, so ships can sail from Africa northeast during those months. Local coastal shipping thus had to haul cargoes from south of Zanzibar and then transfer them to other ships for the annual round-trip voyages to Arabia and beyond.

Long-distance trade came into its own in Islamic times—about the ninth century—as an Arab monopoly. However, long before the coming of Islam, trade was apparently largely in the hands of

Arabs, many of whom had settled in the East African coastal towns and in Iran and India to handle this international commerce. We can document Graeco-Roman contact with these East African centers of Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade from as early as the first century C.E. Most of the coastal trading towns were independent, although Rhapta, the one town mentioned in the earliest Greek source, *The Periplus* (ca. 89 C.E.), was a dependency of a southern Arabian state.

The overseas trade was evidently even more international than the earliest sources indicate. Today, Malagasy, the Austronesian language of Madagascar, points to the antiquity of contact with the East Indies. Even before the beginning of our era, bananas, coconut palms, and other crops indigenous to Southeast Asia had spread across Africa as staple foods. Further, as a result of the early regular commercial ties to distant lands of Asia, extra-African ethnic and cultural mixing has long been the rule for the East African coast; even today, its linguistic and cultural traditions are rich and varied (see Chapter 15).

East Africa imported such items as Persian Gulf pottery, Chinese porcelain, and cotton cloth. The major African export good around which the east coast trade revolved was ivory, which was in perennial demand from Greece to India and even China. The slave trade was another major business. Slaves were procured, often inland, in East Africa and exported to the Arab and Persian world, as well as to India or China. Gold became important in external trade only in Islamic times, from about the tenth century onward, as we shall see in Chapter 15. Wood and cereals were also shipped abroad.

The history of inland East Africa south of Ethiopia is more difficult to trace, again because of the absence of written sources. However, linguistic clues and other evidence indicate some key developments in the eastern highlands. These regions had seen an early diffusion of peoples from the north, and over the centuries small groups continued to move into new areas. Of the early migrants from the north, first came peoples speaking Kushitic languages of the Afro-Asiatic family, likely cattle herders and grain cultivators. Perhaps as early as 2000 B.C.E., they pushed from their homeland on the Ethiopian plateau south down the Rift Valley as far as the southern end of Lake Tanganyika. They apparently displaced Neolithic hunter-gatherers who may have been related to the Khoisan minorities of modern southern and East Africa. Although Kushitic languages are spoken from east of Lake Rudolph northward in abundance, farther south only isolated remnants of Kushitic speakers remain today, largely in the Rift Valley in Tanzania.



**Manyatta.** Aerial view of a contemporary Maasai settlement, or *manyatta*, in Kenya. What differentiates the Maasai from other groups living in the same region?

Later, Nilotic-Saharan speakers moved from the southwestern side of the Ethiopian plateau west over the upper Nile valley by about 1000 C.E. Then they pushed east and south, following older Kushite paths, to spread over the Rift Valley area by the fifteenth century and subsequently much of the East African highlands of modern-day Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, where they supplanted their Kushite predecessors. Two of these Nilotic peoples were the Luo and the Maasai. The Luo spread over a 900-mile-long swath of modern Uganda and parts of southern Sudan and western Kenya, absorbing new cultural elements and adapting to new situations wherever they went. The Maasai, on the other hand, were and still are cattle pastoralists proud of their separate language, way of life, and cultural traditions. These features have distinguished them from the farming or hunting peoples whose settlements abutted their pastures at the top of the southern Rift Valley in modern Kenya and Tanzania. Here the Maasai have concentrated and remained.

These migrations and those of the Bantu peoples, who entered the eastern highlands over many centuries, have made the highlands a melting pot of Kushitic, Nilotic, Bantu, and Khoisan groups. Their characteristics are visible in today's populations, which possess an immense diversity of languages and cultures. Here we can see the diversity of peoples and cultures of the entire African continent mirrored in a single region.

## SUMMARY



**WHAT ARE** the sources and techniques used for studying African history?

**Issues of Interpretation, Sources, and Disciplines.** Historians are challenged in their study of Africa by the paucity of written sources and by the European prejudices that have traditionally devalued African contributions to world culture. Africanists use cross-disciplinary methods and innovative scholarship to understand Africa's past. *page 116*



**WHICH CHARACTERISTICS** of Africa's physical geography have influenced human history on the continent?

**Physical Description of the Continent.** Africa is large; much of it is at high elevation, and generally hot. Climate is very roughly symmetrical north and south of the equator. Communications and migrations are easiest in a few channels. African soils must be nurtured to retain productivity. *page 120*



**WHY ARE** ideas about race not useful in understanding the histories of different groups in Africa?

**African Peoples.** The human species, *Homo sapiens (sapiens)* originated in Africa. Archaeology reveals that there were extensive migrations of peoples across the continent from the earliest days of African history with widespread cross-cultural influences. Although many types of physiologies are visible in Africa, the concept of race does not help historians understand different groups. Migrations and cultural exchanges are not dependent on skin coloration, but many historical sources are distorted by discredited ideas about human characteristics. *page 122*



**WHAT EVIDENCE** is there that early African cultures were in contact with each other?

**The Sahara and the Sudan.** Neolithic agriculturalists spread south of the Sahara bringing the agricultural revolution with them. Pottery styles and iron-smelting technologies spread between groups. The early Iron Age Nok culture is renowned for sophisticated sculpture. *page 125*



**HOW DID** Egyptian civilization and the various Nilotic civilizations—Kush, Meroe, and Aksum—influence each other?

**Nilotic Africa and the Ethiopian Highlands.** Egypt had extensive inter-

action with the Nubian peoples to the south. Nubian kingdoms—Kush, Napata, Meroe, and Aksum (Ethiopia)—adopted many features of Egyptian civilization and sometimes dominated Egypt itself. Aksum adopted Christianity in the fourth century C.E. *page 126*



**WHAT ROLE** did trade play in the rise of political entities in the western and central Sudan?

**The Western and Central Sudan.** Extensive trade across the Sahara between North Africa and the western and central Sudan enabled products and ideas from the Mediterranean to reach the African interior in exchange for African products, such as gold, ivory, and salt. Large, settled populations facilitated the development of states. *page 131*



**WHY DID** the coastal and inland regions of East Africa have different histories?

**Central, Southern, and East Africa.** The dominance of the Bantu language across the African subcontinent reflects ancient migration patterns. On the coast of East Africa, trade across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean with Arabia and east Asia fostered a distinctive and sophisticated culture. *page 135*

## INTERPRETING THE PAST

### Trade and Kingship in Ancient Africa

Several sources for this chapter highlight the continuous cultural and economic interactions between Africa and surrounding regions in this period. Two predominant themes emerge: first, the central importance of kingship along with the accompanying symbols of authority; and second, the evidence of wide-ranging, interconnected trading networks. In the following exercise, use the source documents and visual sources to address questions relating to cross-cultural interaction.

### Sources from MyHistoryLab for Chapter 5

The primary sources for this chapter vary widely in perspective and time period. *Aspalta as King of Kush* dates from 600 B.C.E., *Periplus* dates from the first century C.E., and *History of the Wars* dates from 550 C.E. *Aspalta* focuses on the election

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why have historians generally paid more attention to pharaonic Egypt than to the societies of sub-Saharan Africa?
2. Summarize the argument for including writing among the necessary attributes of a "civilization." Summarize the argument against the writing requirement. Which argument do you find more compelling?
3. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the various sources and tools available to scholars of early African history.
4. What does the diffusion of peoples and languages in Africa tell us about early African history?
5. How does the political system of the Meroitic Empire compare to that of Egypt?
6. How did Aksum become a Christian state?
7. What were the most important goods for African internal trade? Which products were traded abroad? What can we learn from these trade patterns?
8. What was the role of geography in early African history? What about the specific case of Ghana? Of North Africa? Of the East African littoral? Of southern Africa?
9. Is the role of geography different in Africa than in the Near East or other regions you have studied? Explain.
10. What information presented in this chapter was most surprising to you, and why?

## KEY TERMS

**Afro-Asiatic** (p. 123)  
**Aksum** (AHK-suhm) (p. 128)  
**Austronesian** (p. 123)  
**Bantu** (BAN-tu) (p. 123)  
**cataract** (p. 120)  
**Kalahari** (p. 120)  
**Khoisan** (KOI-sahn) (p. 123)  
**Kush** (koosh) (p. 126)  
**Meroe** (MEH-roh-ee) (p. 128)  
**Monophysite**  
 (moh-NOH-fiss-it) (p. 131)  
**Niger-Congo** (p. 123)  
**Nilo-Saharan** (p. 123)  
**Nilotic Africa** (p. 122)  
**Nok** (p. 126)

**Sahara** (p. 120)  
**Sahel** (p. 120)  
**savanna** (p. 120)  
**Sudan** (p. 122)  
**trypanosomiasis**  
 (try-PAH-no-so-MY-oh-sis)  
 (p. 131)

Note: To learn more about the topics in this chapter, please turn to the Suggested Readings at the end of the book. For additional sources related to this chapter please see the Primary Source DVD at the back of this text.



of the King of Kush in Nubia (today northern Sudan) by a group of military and religious leaders. *Periplus* offers a detailed guide to the East African coast south of Egypt's border, its natural resources, potential for trade, and inhabitants. Finally, Procopius' *History of the Wars* details the struggle between the rulers of Mauretania in North Africa; the late Roman Empire, centered in Constantinople (Byzantium); and the Vandals, a barbarian tribe.

*Aspalta* and Procopius sources show African kingdoms in conflict with neighboring regions—Egypt and Rome. In *Aspalta*, Egyptian priesthood, religious symbolism, and the deity Amon are invoked during the selection of the leader of the Nubian kingdom of Kush. Since Kush had engaged in an ongoing series of wars with Egypt for centuries and had occupied the larger country, the degree of influence is perhaps not surprising. The Procopius excerpt illustrates the fierce resistance of the Mauretani (the origin of "Moors") to Roman/Byzantine occupation,

the disunion of the Moors, and the continuing threat of barbarian invasions from Vandals and later the Visigoths.

### Visual Sources from Chapter 5

*Pyramids at Meroe* (p. 000), *Giant Stela at Aksum* (p. 000)

### Questions

After reading the primary sources and examining the images, note the specific details of cross-cultural influences and their use.

What are these influences?

For what purpose are they invoked? Who is using them?

How do these sources highlight cultural continuities in African history?