African Americans
CHAPTER 1

Africa • • ca. 6000 BCE–ca. 1600 CE
WHAT ARE the geographical characteristics of Africa?
WHERE AND how did humans originate?
WHY ARE ancient African civilizations important?
WHY IS West Africa significant for African-American history?
HOW DID the legacies of West African society and culture influence the way African Americans lived?

West Africans were making iron tools long before Europeans arrived in Africa.
The ancestral homeland of most black Americans is West Africa. Other regions—Angola and East Africa—were caught up in the great Atlantic slave trade that carried Africans to the New World during a period stretching from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. But West Africa was the center of the trade in human beings. Knowing the history of West Africa therefore is important for understanding the people who became the first African Americans.

That history is best understood within the larger context of the history and geography of the whole African continent. This chapter begins with a survey of the larger context. It then explores West Africa’s unique heritage and the facets of its culture that have influenced the lives of African Americans from the Diaspora—the original forced dispersal of Africans from their homeland—to the present.

A Huge and Diverse Land

From north to south, Africa is divided into a succession of climatic zones (see Map 1-1). Except for a fertile strip along the Mediterranean coast and the agriculturally rich Nile River valley, most of the northern third of the continent consists of the Sahara Desert. For thousands of years, the Sahara limited contact between the rest of Africa—known as sub-Saharan Africa—and the Mediterranean coast, Europe, and Asia. South of the Sahara is a semidesert region known as the Sahel, and south of the Sahel is a huge grassland, or savannah, stretching from Ethiopia westward to the Atlantic Ocean. Arab adventurers named this savannah Bilad es Sudan, meaning ‘land of the black people.’ Much of the habitable part of West Africa falls within the savannah. The rest lies within the northern part of a rain forest that extends eastward from the Atlantic coast over most of the central part of the continent. Another region of savannah borders the rain forest to the south, followed by another desert—the Kalahari—and another coastal strip at the continent’s southern extremity.

The Birthplace of Humanity

Paleoanthropologists—scientists who study the evolution and prehistory of humans—have concluded that the origins of humanity lie in the savannah regions of Africa. All people today, in other words, are very likely descendants of beings who lived in Africa millions of years ago.

The first stone tools are associated with the emergence—about 2.4 million years ago—of Homo habilis, the earliest creature designated as within the homo (human) lineage. They butchered meat with stone cutting and chopping tools and built shelters with stone foundations. Like people in hunting and gathering societies today, they probably lived in small bands in which women foraged for plant food and men hunted and scavenged for meat. A more advanced human, Homo erectus, emerged in Africa about 1.6 million years ago, is associated with the first evidence of human use of fire.

Ancient Civilizations and Old Arguments

The earliest civilization in Africa and one of the two earliest civilizations in world history is that of ancient Egypt (see Map 1-1), which emerged in the Nile River valley in
the fourth millennium BCE. Mesopotamian civilization, the other of the two, emerged in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in southwest Asia with the rise of the city-states of Sumer. In both regions, civilization appeared at the end of a long process in which hunting and gathering gave way to agriculture. The settled village life that resulted from this transformation permitted society to become increasingly hierarchical and specialized.

The race of the ancient Egyptians and the nature and extent of their influence on later Western civilizations have long been a source of controversy that reflects more about racial politics of recent history than it reveals about the Egyptians themselves. It is not clear whether they were an offshoot of their Mesopotamian contemporaries, whether they were representatives of a group of peoples whose origins were in both Africa and southwest Asia, or whether the ancestors of both the Egyptians and Mesopotamians were...
black Africans. What is clear is that the ancient Egyptians exhibited a mixture of racial features and spoke a language related to the languages spoken by others in the fertile regions of North Africa and southwest Asia.

Afrocentricists regard ancient Egypt as an essentially black civilization closely linked to other indigenous African civilizations to its south. They maintain that not only did the Egyptians influence later African civilizations but that they had a decisive impact on the Mediterranean Sea region, including ancient Greece and Rome. Therefore in regard to philosophy and science black Egyptians were the originators of Western civilization. Traditionalists respond that modern racial categories have no relevance to the world of the ancient Egyptians. The ancient Greeks, they argue, developed the empirical method of inquiry and notions of individual freedom that characterize Western civilization. What is not under debate, however, is Egypt’s contribution to the spread of civilization throughout the Mediterranean region. No one doubts that in religion, commerce, and art Egypt strongly influenced the development of Greece and subsequent Western civilizations.

**Egyptian Civilization**

A gentle annual flooding regularly irrigates the banks of leaving herd goats, sheep, pigs, and cattle in an otherwise desolate region. The Nile also provided the Egyptians with a transportation and communications artery, while their desert surroundings protected them from foreign invasion. Egypt became a unified kingdom around 3150 BCE. A succession of 31 dynasties ruled it before the Roman Empire conquered it in 30 BCE. Between 1550–1100 BCE, Egypt expanded beyond the Nile valley, creating an empire over coastal regions of southwest Asia as well as Libya and Nubia in Africa. After 1100 BCE, Egypt fell prey to a series of outside invaders. With the invasion of Alexander the Great’s Macedonian army in 331 BCE, Egypt’s ancient culture began a long decline under the pressure of Greek ideas and institutions.

Before then, Egypt had resisted change for thousands of years. Kings presided over a strictly hierarchical society. Beneath them were classes of warriors, priests, merchants, artisans, and peasants. Scribes, who were masters of Egypt’s complex hieroglyphic writing, staffed a large bureaucracy.

Egyptian society was also strictly patrilineal and patriarchal. Egyptian women nonetheless held a high status compared with women in much of the rest of the ancient world. They owned property independently of their husbands, oversaw household slaves, controlled the education of their children, held public office, served as priests, and operated businesses. There were several female rulers, one of whom, Hatshepsut, reigned for 20 years (1478–1458 BCE).

A complex polytheistic religion shaped every facet of Egyptian life. Although there were innumerable gods, two of the more important were the sun god Re (or Ra), who represented the immortality of the Egyptian state, and Osiris, the god of the Nile, who embodied each person’s immortality. Personal immortality and the immortality of the state merged in the person of the king, as expressed in Egypt’s elaborate royal tombs. The most dramatic examples of those tombs, the Great Pyramids at Giza near the modern city of Cairo, were built more than 4,500 years ago to protect the bodies of three kings, so that their souls might successfully enter the life to come. The pyramids also dramatically symbolized the power of the Egyptian state and have endured as embodiments of the grandeur of Egyptian civilization.
Kush, Meroë, and Axum

To the south of Egypt in the upper Nile River valley, in what is today the nation of Sudan, lay the ancient region known as Nubia. As early as the fourth millennium BCE, the black people who lived there interacted with the Egyptians. Archaeological evidence suggests that grain production and the concept of monarchy may have arisen in Nubia and then spread northward to Egypt. But Egypt's population was always much larger than that of Nubia, and during the second millennium BCE, Egypt used its military power to make Nubia an Egyptian colony and control Nubian copper and gold mines. Egyptians also required the sons of Nubian nobles to live in Egypt as hostages.

Egyptian religion, art, hieroglyphics, and political structure influenced Nubia. Then, with the decline of Egypt's decline during the first millennium BCE, the Nubians established an independent kingdom known as Kush, which had its capital at Kerma on the upper Nile River. During the eighth century BCE, the Kushites took control of upper (meaning southern, because the Nile flows south to North) Egypt, and in about 750, the Kushite king Piankhy added lower Egypt to his realm. Piankhy became pharaoh, the title used by Egyptian kings, and founded Egypt's twenty-fifth dynasty, which ruled until the Assyrians, who invaded Egypt from southwest Asia, drove the Kushites out in 663 BCE.

Kush itself remained independent for another thousand years. In 540 BCE a resurgent Egyptian army destroyed Kerma, and the Kushites moved their capital southward to Meroë. The new capital traded with East Africa, with regions to the west across the Sudan, and with the Mediterranean world by way of the Nile River. The development of

The ruined pyramids of Meroë on the banks of the upper Nile River are not as old as those at Giza in Egypt, and they differ from them stylistically. But they nonetheless attest to the cultural connections between Meroë and Egypt.
a smelting technology capable of exploiting local deposits of iron transformed the city into Africa’s first industrial center.

Kush’s wealth attracted powerful enemies, and in 23 BCE a Roman army invaded. But it was actually the decline of Rome and its Mediterranean economy that hurt Kush the most. As the Roman Empire grew weaker and poorer, its trade with Kush declined, and Kush, too, grew weakened. During the early fourth century CE, it fell to the neighboring Noba people, who in turn fell to the nearby kingdom of Axum, whose warriors destroyed Meroë.

Located in what is today Ethiopia, Axum emerged as a nation during the first century BCE as Semitic people from the Arabian Peninsula settled among a local black population. By the time it absorbed Kush during the fourth century CE, Axum had become the first Christian state in sub-Saharan Africa. By the eighth century, shifting trade patterns, environmental depletion, and Islamic invaders combined to reduce Axum’s power. It nevertheless retained its unique culture and its independence.

**WEST AFRICA**

The immediate birthright of most African Americans, however, is to be found not in the ancient civilizations of the Nile valley—although those civilizations are part of the heritage of all Africans—but thousands of miles away among the civilizations that emerged in West Africa during the first millennium BCE.

Like Africa as a whole, West Africa is physically, ethnically, and culturally diverse. Much of West Africa south of the Sahara Desert falls within the savannah that spans the continent from east to west. West and south of the savannah, however, are extensive forests. These two environments—savannah and forest—were home to a great variety of cultures and languages. Patterns of settlement in the region ranged from isolated homesteads and hamlets to villages, towns, and cities.

West Africans began cultivating crops and tending domesticated animals between 1000 BCE and 200 CE. Those who lived on the savannah usually adopted settled village life well before those who lived in the forests. By 500 BCE, beginning with the Nok people of the forest region, some West Africans were producing iron tools and weapons.

From early times, the peoples of West Africa traded among themselves and with the peoples who lived across the Sahara Desert in North Africa. This extensive trade became an essential part of the region’s economy and formed the basis for the three great western Sudanese empires that successively dominated the region from before 800 CE to the beginnings of the modern era.

**ANCIENT GHANA**

The first known kingdom in the western Sudan was Ghana. Founded by the Soninke people in the area north of the modern republic of Ghana, the kingdom’s origins are unclear. It may have arisen as early as the fourth century CE or as late as the eighth century when Arab merchants began to praise its great wealth.

Because they possessed superior iron weapons, the Soninke were able to dominate their neighbors and forge an empire through constant warfare. Ghana’s boundaries reached into the Sahara Desert to its north and modern Senegal to its south. But the empire’s real power lay in commerce.
Ghana’s kings were known in Europe and southwest Asia as the richest of monarchs, and trade produced their wealth. Ghana traded in several commodities. From North Africa came silk, cotton, glass beads, horses, mirrors, dates, and, especially, salt—a scarce necessity in the torridly hot western Sudan. In return, Ghana exported pepper, slaves, and, especially, gold.

Before the fifth century ce, Roman merchants and Berbers—the indigenous people of western North Africa—were West Africa’s chief partners in the trans-Sahara trade. As Roman power declined and Islam spread across North Africa during the seventh and eighth centuries, Arabs replaced the Romans. Arab merchants settled in Saleh, the Muslim part of Kumbi Saleh, Ghana’s capital, which by the twelfth century had become an impressive city. There were stone houses and tombs and as many as 20,000 people. Saleh had several mosques, and some Soninke converted to Islam, although it is unclear whether the royal family joined them. Muslims dominated the royal bureaucracy and in the process introduced Arabic writing to the region.

Commercial and religious rivalries led to Ghana’s decline during the twelfth century. The Almoravids, who were Islamic Berbers from what is today Morocco, had been Ghana’s principal competitors for control of the trans-Sahara trade. In 992 Ghana’s army captured Awdaghost, the Almoravid trade center northwest of Kumbi Saleh. Driven as much by religious fervor as by economic interest, the Almoravids retaliated decisively in 1076 by conquering Ghana. The Soninke regained their independence in 1087, but a little over a century later fell to the Sosso, a previously tributary people.

The Empire of Mali, 1230–1468

Following the defeat of Ghana by the Almoravids, many western Sudanese peoples competed for political and economic power. This contest ended in 1235 when the Mandinka, under their legendary leader Sundiata (c. 1210–1260), defeated the Sosso at the Battle of Kirina. Sundiata then forged the Empire of Mali.

Mali was socially, politically, and economically similar to Ghana. It was larger than Ghana, however, and centered farther south, in a region of greater rainfall and more abundant crops. Sundiata also gained direct control of the gold mines of Wangara, making his empire wealthier than Ghana had been. As a result, Mali’s population grew to eight million.

Sundiata was also an important figure for western Sudanese religion. According to legend, he wielded magical powers to defeat his enemies. This suggests that he practiced an indigenous faith. But Sundiata was also a Muslim and helped make Mali—at least superficially—an Islamic state. West Africans had been converting to Islam since Arab traders arrived in the region centuries before, although many converts, like Sundiata, continued to practice indigenous religions as well. By his time, most merchants and bureaucrats were Muslims, and the empire’s rulers gained stature among Arab states by converting to Islam.

To administer their vast empire at a time when communication was slow, Mali’s rulers relied on personal and family ties with local chiefs. Commerce, bureaucracy, and scholarship also helped hold the empire together. Mali’s most important city was Timbuktu, which had been established during the eleventh century beside the Niger River near the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. By the thirteenth century, Timbuktu had become a major hub for trade in gold, slaves, and salt. It attracted
merchants from throughout the Mediterranean world and became a center of Islamic learning.

The Mali Empire reached its peak during the reign of Mansa Musa (r. 1312–1337). One of the wealthiest rulers the world has known, Musa made himself and Mali famous when in 1324 he undertook a pilgrimage across Africa to the Islamic holy city of Mecca in Arabia. With an entourage of 60,000, a train of one hundred elephants,

**VOICES**

AL BAKRI DESCRIBES KUMBI SALEH AND GHANA’S ROYAL COURT

Nothing remains of the documents compiled by Ghana’s Islamic bureaucracy. As a result, accounts of the civilization are all based on the testimony of Arab or Berber visitors. In this passage, written in the eleventh century, Arab geographer Al Bakri describes the great wealth and power of the king of Ghana and suggests there were tensions between Islam and the indigenous religion of the Soninke.

The city of Ghana [Kumbi Saleh] consists of two towns lying in a plain. One of these towns is inhabited by Muslims. It is large and possesses twelve mosques. . . . There are imams and muezzins, and assistants as well as jurists and learned men. Around the town are wells of sweet water from which they drink and near which they grow vegetables. The town in which the king lives is six miles from the Muslim one, and bears the name Al Ghaba [the forest]. . . . In the town where the king lives, and not far from the hall where he holds his court of justice, is a mosque where pray the Muslims who come on diplomatic missions. Around the king’s town are domed buildings, woods, and copses where live the sorcerers of these people, the men in charge of the religious cult. . . .

Of the people who follow the king’s religion, only he and his heir presumptive, who is the son of his sister, may wear sewn clothes. All the other people wear clothes of cotton, silk, or brocade, according to their means. All men shave their beards and women shave their heads. The king adorns himself like a woman, wearing necklaces and bracelets. . . . The court of appeal [for grievances against officials] is held in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses with gold embroidered trappings. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold, and on his right are the sons of the subordinate kings of his country, all wearing splendid garments and their hair mixed with gold. . . . When the people professing the same religion as the king approach him, they fall on their knees and sprinkle their heads with dust, for this is their way of showing him their respect. As for the Muslims, they greet him only by clapping their hands.

■ What does this passage indicate about life in ancient Ghana?
■ According to Al Bakri, in what ways do customs in Kumbi Saleh differ from customs in Arab lands?

and a propensity for distributing huge amounts of gold to those who greeted him along the way, Musa amazed the Islamic world. After his death, however, Mali declined. In 1468, one of the most powerful of its formerly subject peoples, the Songhai, captured Timbuktu, and their leader, Sunni Ali, founded a new West African empire.

**The Empire of Songhai, 1464–1591**

Like the Mandinka and Soninke before them, the Songhai were great traders and warriors. The Songhai had seceded from Mali in 1375, and under Sunni Ali (r. 1464–1492), who reigned from 1464 to 1492, they built the last and largest of the western Sudanese empires.

When Sunni Ali died by drowning, Askia Muhammad Toure led a successful revolt against Ali’s son to make himself king of Songhai. The new king, (r. 1492–1528), extended the empire northward into the Sahara, westward into Mali, and eastward to include the trading cities of Hausaland. A devout Muslim, Muhammad Toure used his power to spread the influence of Islam within the empire. During a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1497 he established diplomatic relations with Morocco and Egypt and recruited Muslim scholars to serve at the Sankore Mosque at Timbuktu. The mosque became a widely known center for the study of theology, law, mathematics, and medicine. Despite these efforts, by the end of Muhammad Toure’s reign, Islamic culture remained weak in West Africa outside urban areas.

Songhai reached its peak of influence under Askia Daud (r. 1549–1582). But the political balance of power in West Africa was changing rapidly, and, lacking new leaders
The Ancient Manuscripts of Timbuktu

Timbuktu, ancient Mali’s most important city, was an important center for a thriving trade in gold, salt, and slaves. It was also a city of spectacular intellectual and cultural achievements. Its many mosques and schools helped support a book trade that was famous throughout the region. The city took pride in its intellectual accomplishments. Many of the ancient manuscripts that exist today were carefully preserved as family treasures by the residents of the area over many generations. The manuscripts provide compelling evidence of the skill and sophistication of Mali’s scientists, physicians, philosophers, and theologians. They also demonstrate the fact that Africa has a rich legacy of written culture, aspects of which crossed the Atlantic with the enslaved Africans who were transported to the Americas.

Many of Timbuktu’s ancient texts are still housed in the libraries of private families in Mali.

This text was written to train scholars in the field of astronomy. On this page, the text and diagram describe and demonstrate the rotation of the heavens.

Islamic mystics played an important part in Timbuktu’s religious life. This diagram explains the life of the mystics, which revolved around the teaching of their master.

The manuscripts show Africa’s rich legacy of written history. Such written records are believed to be crucial markers of civilization.

Islam was a powerful force in West Africa, but its practitioners were largely concentrated in cities like Timbuktu. What might explain this fact?
as resourceful as Sunni Ali or Muhammad Toure, Songhai failed to adapt. Since the 1430s, adventurers from the European country of Portugal had been establishing trading centers along the Guinea Coast, seeking gold and diverting it from the trans-Saharan trade. Their success threatened the Arab rulers of North Africa, Songhai’s traditional partners in the trans-Saharan trade. In 1591 the king of Morocco, hoping to regain access to West African gold, sent an army of 4,000 mostly Spanish mercenaries armed with muskets and cannons across the Sahara to attack Gao, Songhai’s capital. Only 1,000 of the soldiers survived the grueling march to confront Songhai’s elite cavalry at Tondibi on the approach to Gao. But the Songhai forces were armed only with bows and lances, which were no match for firearms, and the mercenaries routed them. Its army destroyed, the Songhai empire fell apart. The Moroccans soon left the region, and West Africa was without a government powerful enough to intervene when the Portuguese, other Europeans, and the African kingdoms of the Guinea Coast became more interested in trading for human beings than for gold.

THE WEST AFRICAN FOREST REGION

The area called the forest region of West Africa, which includes stretches of savannah, extends 2,000 miles along the Atlantic coast from Senegambia in the northwest to the former kingdom of Benin (modern Cameroon) in the east. Significant migration into the forests began only after 1000 CE, as the western Sudanese climate became increasingly dry. Because people migrated southward from the Sudan in small groups over an extended period, the process brought about considerable cultural diversification.

Colonizing a region covered with thick vegetation was hard work. In some portions of the forest, agriculture did not supplant hunting and gathering until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In more open parts of the region, however, several small kingdoms emerged centuries earlier. Although none of these kingdoms ever grew as large as the empires of the western Sudan, some were powerful.

The great mosque at the West African city of Jenne was first built during the fourteenth century CE. It demonstrates the importance of Islam in the region’s trading centers. Rodenick J. McIntosh, Rice University
The peoples of the forest region are of particular importance for African-American history because of the role they played in the Atlantic slave trade as both slave traders and as victims of the trade. Space limitations permit only a survey of the most important of these peoples, beginning with those of Senegambia in the northwest.

The inhabitants of Senegambia shared a common history and spoke closely related languages, but they were not politically united. Parts of the region had been incorporated within the empires of Ghana and Mali and had been exposed to Islamic influences. Senegambian society was strictly hierarchical, with royalty at the top and slaves at the bottom. Most people were farmers.

Southeast of Senegambia, the Akan states emerged during the sixteenth century as the gold trade provided local rulers with the wealth they needed to clear forests and initiate agricultural economies. The rulers traded gold from mines they controlled for slaves, who did the difficult work of cutting trees and burning refuse. Then settlers received open fields from the rulers in return for a portion of their produce and services. When Europeans arrived, they traded guns for gold. The guns in turn allowed the Akan states to expand, and during the late seventeenth century, one of them, the Ashantee, created a well-organized and densely populated kingdom, comparable in size to the modern country of Ghana. By the eighteenth century, this kingdom not only dominated the central portion of the forest region, but also used its army extensively to capture slaves for sale to European traders.

To the east of the Akan states (in modern Benin and western Nigeria) lived the people of the Yoruba culture. They gained ascendancy in the area as early as 1000 CE by trading kola nuts and cloth to the peoples of the western Sudan. During the seventeenth century, the Oyo people, employing a well-trained cavalry, imposed political unity on part of the Yoruba region. They, like the Ashantee, became extensively involved in the Atlantic slave trade. Located to the west of the Oyo were the Fon people, who formed the Kingdom of Dahomey, which rivaled Oyo as a center for the slave trade.

At the eastern end of the forest region was the Kingdom of Benin, which controlled much of what is today southern Nigeria. The people of this kingdom shared a common heritage with the Yoruba, who played a role in its formation during the thirteenth century. During the fifteenth century, after a reform of its army, Benin began to expand to the Niger River in the east, to the Gulf of Guinea to the south, and into Yoruba country to the west. The kingdom peaked during the late sixteenth century.

Benin remained little influenced by Islam or Christianity, but like other coastal kingdoms, it joined in the Atlantic slave trade. Beginning in the late fifteenth century, the Oba of Benin allowed Europeans to enter the country to trade for gold, pepper, ivory, and slaves. By the seventeenth century, Benin’s prosperity depended on the slave trade.
To Benin’s east was Igboland, a densely populated but politically weak region stretching along the Niger River. The Igbo people lived in one of the stateless societies common in West Africa. In these societies, families rather than central authorities ruled. Village elders provided local government and life centered on family homesteads. Igboland had long exported field workers and skilled artisans to Benin and other kingdoms. When Europeans arrived, they expanded this trade, which brought many Igbos to the Americas (see Map 1-2).

**Kongo and Angola**

Although the forebears of most African Americans originated in West Africa, a large minority came from Central Africa. In particular they came from the area around the Congo River and its tributaries and the region to the south that the Portuguese called Angola. The people of these regions had much in common with those of the Guinea Coast. They divided labor by gender, lived in villages composed of extended families, and accorded semidivine status to their kings.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, much of the Congo River system, with its fertile valleys and abundant fish, came under the control of the Kingdom of Kongo. This kingdom’s wealth also derived from its access to salt and iron and its extensive trade with the interior of the continent. Nzinga Knuwu, who was Mani Kongo (the Kongolese term for king) when Portuguese expeditions arrived in the region in the late fifteenth century, surpassed other African rulers in welcoming the intruders. His son Nzinga Mbemba tried to convert the kingdom to Christianity and remodel it along European lines. The resulting unrest, combined with Portuguese greed and the effects
of the slave trade, undermined royal authority and ultimately led to the breakup of the kingdom and the disruption of the entire Kongo-Angola region.

WEST AFRICAN SOCIETY AND CULTURE

West Africa’s great ethnic and cultural diversity makes it hazardous to generalize about the social and cultural background of the first African Americans. The dearth of written records from the region south of the Sudan compounds the difficulties. But working with a variety of sources, including oral histories, traditions, and archaeological and anthropological studies, historians have pieced together a broad understanding of the way the people of West Africa lived at the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade.

FAMILIES AND VILLAGES

By the early sixteenth century, most West Africans were farmers. They usually lived in hamlets or villages composed of extended families and clans called lineages. Generally, one lineage occupied each village, although some large lineages peopled several villages. Each extended family descended from a common ancestor, and each lineage claimed descent from a mythical personage. Depending on the ethnic group involved, extended families and lineages were either patrilineal or matrilineal.

In extended families, nuclear families (husband, wife, and children) or in some cases polygynous families (husband, wives, and children) acted as economic units. Nuclear and polygynous families existed in the context of a broader family community composed of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Elders in the extended family had great power over the economic and social lives of its members.

Villages tended to be larger on the savannah than in the forest. In both regions, people used forced earth or mud to construct small houses. A nuclear or polygynous family unit might have several houses. In nuclear households, the husband occupied the larger house and his wife the smaller. In polygynous households, the husband had the largest house, and his wives lived in smaller ones.

Villagers’ few possessions included cots, rugs, stools, and wooden storage chests. Their tools and weapons included bows, spears, iron axes, hoes, and scythes. Households used grinding stones, woven baskets, and a variety of ceramic vessels to prepare and store food. Villagers in both the savannah and forest regions produced cotton for clothing.

Farming in West Africa was not easy. Drought was common on the savannah. In the forest, where diseases carried by the tsetse fly sickened draft animals, agricultural plots were limited in size because they had to be cleared by hand. The fields surrounding forest villages averaged just two or three acres per family. Although there was private ownership of land in West Africa, people generally worked land communally, dividing tasks by gender.

WOMEN

In general, men dominated women in West Africa. As previously noted, men often had two or more wives, and, to a degree, custom held women to be the property of men. But West African women also enjoyed an amount of freedom that impressed Arabs and Europeans. In ancient Ghana, women sometimes served as government officials. Later,
in the forest region, they sometimes inherited property and owned land—or at least controlled its income. Women—including enslaved women—in the royal court of Dahomey held high government posts. Ashantee noblewomen could own property, although they themselves could be considered inheritable property. The Ashantee queen held her own court to administer women’s affairs.

Women retained far more sexual freedom in West Africa than was the case in Europe or southwest Asia. Sexual freedom in West Africa was, however, more apparent than real. Throughout the region secret societies instilled in men and women ethical standards of personal behavior. The most important secret societies were the women’s Sande and the men’s Poro. They initiated boys and girls into adulthood and provided sex education. They also established standards for personal conduct, especially in regard to issues of gender, by emphasizing female virtue and male honor. Other secret societies influenced politics, trade, medical practice, recreation, and social gatherings.

**CLASS AND SLAVERY**

Although many West Africans lived in stateless societies, most lived in hierarchically organized states headed by monarchs who claimed divine or semidivine status. Most of these monarchs’ power was far from absolute, but they commanded armies, taxed commerce, and accumulated considerable wealth. Beneath the royalty were classes of landed nobles, warriors, peasants, and bureaucrats. Lower classes included blacksmiths, butchers, weavers, woodcarvers, and tanners.

Slavery had been part of this hierarchical social structure since ancient times. Although very common throughout West Africa, slavery was less so in the forest region than on the savannah. It took many forms and was not necessarily a permanent condition. Like people in other parts of the world, West Africans held war captives—including men, women, and children—to be without rights and suitable for enslavement. In Islamic regions, masters had obligations to their slaves similar to those of a guardian for a ward and were responsible for their slaves’ religious well-being. In non-Islamic regions, the children of slaves acquired legal protections, such as the right not to be sold away from the land they occupied.

Slaves who served either in the royal courts of a West African kingdom or in a kingdom’s armies often exercised power over free people and could acquire property. Also, the slaves of peasant farmers often had standards of living similar to those of their masters. Slaves who worked under overseers in gangs on large estates were far less fortunate. However, the children and grandchildren of these enslaved agricultural workers, gained employment and privileges similar to those of free people. Slaves retained a low social status, but in many respects slavery in West African societies functioned as a means of assimilation.

**RELIGION**

There were two religious traditions in fifteenth-century West Africa: Islamic and indigenous. Islam, which Arab traders introduced into West Africa, took root first in the Sudanese empires and remained more prevalent in the cosmopolitan savannah. Even there it was stronger in cities than in rural areas because it was the religion of merchants and bureaucrats. Islam fostered literacy in Arabic, the spread of Islamic learning, and the construction of mosques. Islam is resolutely monotheistic, asserting that Allah is the only God. It recognizes its founder, Muhammad, as well as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, as prophets but regards none of them as divine.
West Africa’s indigenous religions remained strongest in the forest region. They were polytheistic and animistic, recognizing many divinities and spirits. Beneath an all-powerful but remote creator god, lesser gods represented the forces of nature or were associated with particular mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks. Indigenous West African religion, in other words, saw the force of God in all things.

In part because practitioners of West African indigenous religions perceived the creator god to be unapproachable, they invoked the spirits of their ancestors and turned to magicians and oracles for divine assistance. These rituals were part of everyday life, making organized churches and professional clergy rare. Instead, family members with an inclination to do so assumed religious duties. These individuals encouraged their relatives to participate in ceremonies that involved music, dancing, and animal sacrifice in honor of deceased ancestors. Funerals were especially important because they symbolized the linkage between living and dead.

**ART AND MUSIC**

As was the case in other parts of the world, religious belief and practice influenced West African art. West Africans, seeking to preserve the images of their ancestors, excelled in woodcarving and sculpture in terra-cotta, bronze, and brass. Throughout the region, artists produced wooden masks representing in highly stylized manners ancestral spirits and gods. Wooden and terra-cotta figurines, sometimes referred to as ‘fetishes,’ were also extremely common.

West African music also served religion. Folk musicians employed such instruments as drums, xylophones, bells, flutes, and mbanzas (predecessor to the banjo) to produce a highly rhythmic accompaniment to the dancing associated with religious rituals. A call-and-response style of singing also played a vital role in ritual. Vocal music, produced in a full-throated, but often raspy, style, had polyphonic textures and sophisticated rhythms.

**LITERATURE: ORAL HISTORIES, POETRY, AND TALES**

West African literature was part of an oral tradition that passed from generation to generation. At its most formal, it was a literature developed by specially trained poets and musicians who served kings and nobles. But West African literature was also a folk art that expressed the views of the common people.

At a king’s court there could be several poet-musicians who had high status and specialized in poems glorifying rulers and their ancestors by linking fact and fiction. The self-employed poets, called griots, who traveled from place to place were socially inferior to court poets, but they functioned in a similar manner. Both court poets and griots were men. Women were more involved in folk literature. They joined men in the creating and performing work songs. They led in creating and singing dirges, lullabies, and satirical verses.

Just as significant for African-American history were the West African prose tales. Like similar stories told in other parts of Africa, these tales took two forms: those with human characters and those with animal characters who represented humans. The tales centered on human characters dealing with such subjects as creation, the origins of death, paths to worldly success, and romantic love.

The animal tales aimed to entertain and to teach lessons. They focused on small creatures, often referred to as ‘trickster characters,’ who were pitted against larger beasts. In West Africa, these tales represented the ability of common people to counteract the
power of kings and nobles. When the tales reached America, they became allegories for the struggle between enslaved African Americans and their powerful white masters.

**Technology**

West African technology was also distinctive and important. Although much knowledge about this technology has been lost, iron refining and forging, textile production, architecture, and rice cultivation helped shape life in the region.

As previously mentioned, iron technology had existed in West Africa since ancient times. Blacksmiths produced tools for agriculture, weapons for hunting and war, and ceremonial staffs and religious amulets. These products encouraged the development of cities and kingdoms.

Architecture embodied Islamic and indigenous elements, with the former predominant on the savanna and the latter in the forest region. Building materials consisted of stone, mud, and wood. Public buildings reached large proportions, and some mosques served 3,000 worshippers. Massive stone or mud walls surrounded cities and towns.

Handlooms for household production existed throughout Africa for thousands of years, and cloth made from pounding bark persisted in the forest region into modern times. But trade and Islamic influences led to commercial textile production. By the ninth century CE, large looms, some equipped with peddles, produced narrow strips of wool or cotton. Men, rather than women, made cloth and tailored it into embroidered robes, shawls, hats, and blankets, which Muslim merchants traded over wide areas.

Of particular importance for African-American history, West Africans living along rivers in coastal regions had produced rice since approximately 1000 BCE. Portuguese who arrived during the fifteenth century CE reported large diked rice fields. Deliberate flooding of these fields, transplanting sprouts, and intensive cultivation were practices that reemerged in the colonial South Carolina low country.

**Conclusion**

Although all of Africa contributed to their background, the history of African Americans begins in West Africa, the region from which the ancestors of most of them were unwillingly wrested. Historians have discovered, as subsequent chapters will show, that West Africans taken to America and their descendants in America preserved much more of their ancestral way of life than scholars once believed possible. West African family organization, work habits, language structures and some words, religious beliefs, legends and stories, pottery styles, art, and music all reached America. These African legacies, although often sharply modified, influenced the way African Americans and other Americans lived in their new land and continue to shape American life.

This is an Ashantee sword from West Africa. It is sheathed in a ray-skin cover and has a gold handle. Although this sword dates to early modern times, it is likely that Ashantee craftsmen constructed similar swords much earlier.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events in Africa</th>
<th>World Events</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>10 MILLION YEARS AGO</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>5–10 million years ago</td>
<td>1.6 million years ago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separation of hominids from apes</td>
<td>Homo erectus beginning to spread through Eurasia</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4 million years ago</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emergence of <em>australopithecines</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2.4 million years ago</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emergence of <em>Homo habilis</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1.7 million years ago</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emergence of <em>Homo erectus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1.5 MILLION YEARS AGO</strong></td>
<td><strong>8000 BCE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>100,000–200,000 years ago</td>
<td>Appearance of the first agricultural settlements in southwest Asia</td>
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<td>Appearance of modern humans</td>
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<td><strong>6000 BCE</strong></td>
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<td>Beginning of Sahara Desert formation</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5000 BCE</strong></td>
<td><strong>3500 BCE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>5000 BCE</td>
<td>Sumerian civilization in Mesopotamia</td>
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<td>First agricultural settlements in Egypt</td>
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<td>3800 BCE</td>
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<td>Predynastic period in Egypt</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 3150 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unification of Egypt</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2500 BCE</strong></td>
<td><strong>2300 BCE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2700–2150 BCE</td>
<td>Beginning of Indus valley civilization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egypt’s Old Kingdom</td>
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<td>2100–1650 BCE</td>
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<td>Egypt’s Middle Kingdom</td>
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<td><strong>1500 BCE</strong></td>
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<td>1550–700 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egypt’s New Kingdom</td>
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<td><strong>1600–1250 BCE</strong></td>
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<td>Mycenaean Greek civilization</td>
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<td>c. 1500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beginning of Shang dynasty in China</td>
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<td>Events in Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1000 BCE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>750–670 BCE</td>
<td>600–336 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rule of Kushites over Egypt</td>
<td>Classical Greek civilization</td>
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<td>540 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Founding of Meroë</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 540 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beginning of iron smelting in West Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>50 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Destruction of Kush</td>
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<td><strong>500 CE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>632–750 CE</td>
<td>204 BCE–476 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Islamic conquest of North Africa</td>
<td>Domination of Mediterranean by Roman Republic and Empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 750–1076 CE</td>
<td>500–1350 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empire of Ghana; Islam begins to take root in West Africa</td>
<td>European Middle Ages</td>
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<td><strong>1200 CE</strong></td>
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<td>1230–1468 CE</td>
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<td>Empire of Mali</td>
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<td>c. 1300 CE</td>
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<td>Rise of Yoruba states</td>
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<td><strong>1400 CE</strong></td>
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<td>1434 CE</td>
<td>1492 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Start of Portuguese exploration and establishment of trading outposts on West African coast</td>
<td>Christopher Columbus and European encounter of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1450 CE</td>
<td>1517 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centralization of power in Benin</td>
<td>Reformation begins in Europe</td>
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<td>1464–1591 CE</td>
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<td>Empire of Songhai</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1600 CE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1650 CE</td>
<td>1610 CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rise of Kingdom of Dahomey and the Akan states</td>
<td>Scientific revolution begins in Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events in Africa</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Review Questions**

1. What was the role of Africa in the evolution of modern humanity?
2. Discuss the controversy concerning the racial identity of the ancient Egyptians. What is the significance of this controversy for the history of African Americans?
3. Compare and contrast the western Sudanese empires with the forest civilizations of the Guinea Coast.
4. Discuss the role of religion in West Africa. What was the African religious heritage of black Americans?
5. Describe West African society on the eve of the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade. What were the society’s strengths and weaknesses?

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**myhistorylab Connections**

Reinforce what you learned in this chapter by studying the many documents, images, maps, review tools, and videos available at [www.myhistorylab.com](http://www.myhistorylab.com).

**Read and Review**

- **Study and Review on myhistorylab.com** Study Plan for Chapter 1
- **Read the Document on myhistorylab.com**
  A Tenth-Century Arab Description of the East African Coast
  Ghana and Its People in the Mid-Eleventh Century
  Herodotus on Carthaginian Trade and on the City of Meroe
  Job Hortop and the British Enter the Slave Trade, 1567
  Leo Africanus’ Description of West Africa (1500)
  Muslim Reform in Songhai
- **View the Map on myhistorylab.com**
  Africa Climate Regions and Early Sites

**Research and Explore**

Consider these questions in a short research paper.

*What were the key features of West African society and culture? What place did slavery have in that society?*
Listen on myhistorylab.com
Ghana: Ewe-Atsiagbekor from Roots of Black Music in America

Watch the Video on myhistorylab.com
Africa as an Urban, Not Rural, Place
West African States
States, Societies, and Cities in Medieval West Africa

Listen on myhistorylab.com
Hear the audio files for Chapter 1 at www.myhistorylab.com.