
Chapter 1 Excerpt from the textbook *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents* by Deborah Gray White, Mia Bay, and Waldo E. Martin Jr.

CHAPTER 1

African Origins: Beginnings to ca. 1600 c.e.

CHRONOLOGY Events specific to African history are boldfaced. General world history events are in black.

c. 200,000 years ago

Anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) appear in Africa

c. 70,000 years ago

Homo sapiens begin migrations beyond Africa

c. 20,000 years ago

San people emerge as hunter-gatherers in southern Africa

c. 6000–3000 b.c.e.

Farming begins in Egypt and, later, West Africa

c. 3500 b.c.e.

Bantu expansion begins; central, eastern, and southern parts of Africa adopt metallurgy and farming over the following millennia

c. 3100 b.c.e.

Rule by pharaohs is established in Egypt

The Egyptian empire endures in various forms until 332 b.c.e.

c. 3000 b.c.e.

Kingdom of Kush develops in Nubia

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

c. 2200–2000 b.c.e.

Complex societies emerge in China, India, and Central Asia

c. 750 b.c.e.

Kushites seize control of Egypt and rule for almost a century

c. 500 b.c.e.

Nok people practice iron technology and create sophisticated fired clay objects

Beginnings of the trans-Saharan trade connecting West Africa with North Africa and the Mediterranean world

c. 100 c.e.

Aksum rises to power as a naval and trading empire

479 c.e.

Fall of Rome marks the beginning of the medieval period in Europe

610 c.e.

Prophet Muhammad introduces Islam

c. 830–1230 c.e.

Ghana empire rules western and central Africa

c. 1230–1500 c.e.

Mali empire rules western and central Africa

1400s c.e.

Aztecs rule in Central America; Incas rule in part of South America

c. 1460–1645 c.e.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

Songhay empire replaced Mali as the most powerful state in West Africa

“What Is Africa to Me?” The Ancestral Origins of Black Americans

“What is Africa to me?” the Harlem Renaissance writer Countee Cullen asked in a 1925 poem, reflecting on how he should understand the ancestral heritage of African Americans. As a black American, should he align himself with the “Strong bronzed men and regal black / Women from whose loins I sprang / When the birds of Eden sang?” Or was Africa just a distant point of origin? “One three centuries removed / From the scenes his fathers loved / Spicy grove and banyan tree, / What is Africa to me?”¹ Cullen was not alone in asking this question. From the earliest days of the forced migration of African peoples to European colonies in the Americas, black Americans have maintained a sense of ancestral identity in which the idea of Africa has a place. However, the connections they have drawn have been complicated. Descendants of African peoples who hailed from many different homelands and belonged to many different ethnic groups, African Americans came together as a people in the context of a transatlantic slave trade that lasted for generations. Consequently, many, if not most, modern-day African Americans cannot trace the lineage of their families to the specific African societies in which their ancestors originated. Instead, African Americans tend to embrace an ancestral lineage that encompasses many different locations and epochs in Africa’s long and eventful history.

While most modern-day African Americans are descendants of West African and west-central African peoples, black Americans have long seen their ancestral past inscribed across the African continent writ large rather than confined to this region. For instance, even though she was kidnapped from Senegambia as a child, the eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley did not describe herself as originating there specifically. Instead, she understood her life story to be shaped by “Being Brought from Africa to America.”² And, similarly, when John Russwurm, who co founded black America’s first newspaper in 1827, looked back on the history of his people, he traced his roots to ancient Egypt and Ethiopia rather than to any of the West African societies where the ancestors of most American blacks originated.³

The affinities African Americans express for ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, as well as the idea of an African homeland, should not surprise us. For just as Europe’s historically divided peoples have long come together around a common European identity, diasporic Africans have also embraced a transnational homeland and lineage. And while Europeans in the past frequently dismissed Africa as a “Dark Continent” with few claims to distinction, Africans in the Americas have often revered their heritage and rejected European characterizations and stereotypes.

African Americans have nourished cultural and symbolic ties to African civilizations and peoples ever since they first departed the continent. African-born blacks cherished direct connections to the homelands they left behind, which in turn shaped the African American culture and traditions they passed along to their descendants. Accordingly, any discussion of African

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

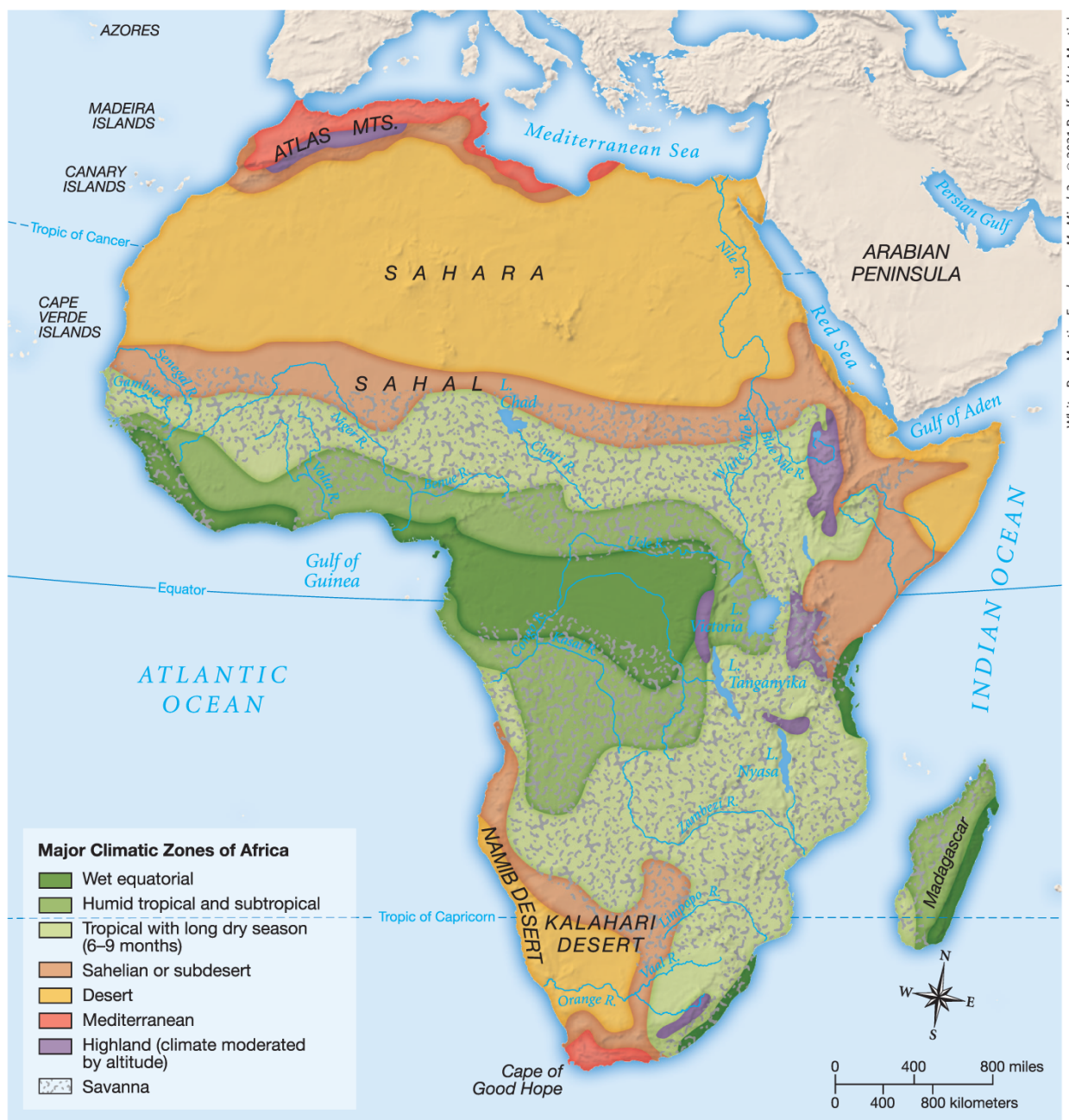
American history must begin in Africa. This chapter traces the broad outlines of Africa's history, providing an overview of the rich ancestral heritage of African Americans.

Africa: Humanity's Homeland

Over 11 million square miles in size, Africa is the second-largest continent on earth and the only one to lie in all four hemispheres. Not surprisingly, given its size and central location, modern Africa is home to more countries than any other continent. Combined, these 54 countries are home to 3,000 different ethnic groups, whose members speak more than 2,100 different languages. The peoples of Africa practice a variety of religions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and many traditional African religions. Many of Africa's countries are of relatively recent origin, but the continent's social, political, and ethnic diversity has truly ancient roots. As the homeland of all humankind, Africa has the longest record of human habitation, beginning with the emergence of anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) around 200,000 years ago. The archaic ancestors of Europeans, Asians, aboriginal Australians, Native Americans, and other far-flung populations once lived there, as did the ancestors of other groups that never left the continent, such as Africa's pygmy populations and Khoisan hunter-gatherers.

A Varied Landscape

The many linguistic, ethnic, and cultural differences that divide Africa's populations have been shaped by the continent's long history and varied landscape (Map 1.1). The world's largest desert and the world's most impenetrable rainforest, as well as nearly every other kind of natural environment, can be found in Africa. The prime meridian and the equator run through the continent, which encompasses climates that vary dramatically, ranging from tropical to glacial. For the most part, Africa's terrain is challenging.



MAP 1.1 Africa's Diverse Geography

The world's second-largest continent after Asia, Africa is bisected by the equator and subject to a variety of very different climates. This map divides the continent into eight climate regions that range in temperature from desert to tropical rain forest to chilly highlands.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

■ **How would this diverse geography be a factor in the continent's cultural diversity?**

Africa is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, the Red Sea to the northeast, the Indian Ocean to the east and southeast, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The Equator runs through the center of the continent. The Tropic of Cancer runs across the north and the Tropic of Capricorn runs across the south of the continent.

The wet equatorial regions, shaded in dark green, are along the Atlantic coast of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte D'Ivoire, parts of Nigeria, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea, majority of the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the eastern coast of South Africa, Tanzania, and Madagascar.

The Humid tropical/subtropical zones, shaded in green, are in Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Côte D'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and parts of Nigeria, Central African Republic, Gabon, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, and majority of Madagascar.

The Tropical with long dry season (6 to 9 months) areas, shaded in light green, covers major portions of central and southern Africa. It prevails in areas of Gambia, southern Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, parts of western Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, majority of eastern South Africa, and minor regions in southwestern Madagascar.

The Sahelian or Sub desert regions, shaded in light brown, are in Senegal, central regions of Mali, Niger, and Chad, parts of Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and areas of Angola, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, and minor parts of Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya.

The Desert regions, shaded in yellow, includes almost all of northern Africa. It includes Western Sahara, the majority of Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Libya, Egypt, northern Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia, and minor western portions of Angola, Namibia, and South Africa covering the Namib Desert region.

The Mediterranean regions, shaded in red, include the Mediterranean coast of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, minor regions of Libya along the coast, and the regions along the southern tip of South Africa, including Cape Town.

The Highlands, shaded in purple, are marked to the west of the Great Rift Valley in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, lands to the east of Lake Victoria in Kenya and Tanzania, areas to the north of Lake Malawi in Tanzania, and small lands in the eastern portion of South Africa.

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Savanna is scattered across the areas with Tropical with long dry season and Humid tropical/subtropical climate. It is also spread across parts of wet equatorial zones and Sahelian or Sub desert regions.

Mild in climate only at its northern and southern ends, Africa is a hot continent, where desert and tropical climates predominate and periodic droughts parch many regions. Its topography is less obviously daunting than its climate. Although home to a few mountainous areas, it is composed largely of flatlands that sit on a vast plateau of ancient rocks. However, its soils are as ancient as its rocks and do not easily support human habitation. Past their prime, they are infertile and prone to erosion. Accordingly, African history is at least in part a story in which African societies have struggled to survive in harsh environments. Indeed, historian John Iliffe suggests that Africans should be understood for their achievements as a people “who have colonised an especially hostile region of the world on behalf of the entire human race.”⁴

The African Origins of Humankind

Whereas nineteenth-century thinkers such as the German philosopher Hegel once maintained that Africa “is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit,”⁵ the continent is now accorded a central place in the story of human development. Modern-day paleontologists, whose work involves studying the fossil record, maintain that human history begins in Africa. Our species, *Homo sapiens*, is the last species in the group known as hominins; hominins diverged from ancestors of chimps and other apes some 6 or 7 million years ago. The fossil evidence shows the evolution of hominins in Africa.

Among the oldest-known hominin fossils are the bones of Lucy, or Dinkinesh, which were discovered near the village of Hadar in Ethiopia in 1974. Estimated to have lived 3.2 million years ago, Lucy is an unusually well-preserved example of an early human ancestor known as *Australopithecus afarensis*. Her discovery helped convince scientists that Africa was the crucial hub for human evolution, rather than Europe or Asia, as the world’s leading scholars had once thought. Since her excavation, the discovery of the fossilized remains of other early human ancestors in Morocco, South Africa, and additional sites in Ethiopia have complicated assessments of Lucy as the “mother of humankind.” Instead, recent fossil evidence suggests that modern human beings may have descended from as many as 15 to 20 different species of hominins, many of whom left no living descendants. Paleontologists still trace the ancestral roots of all modern human beings back to Africa. However, they are now increasingly convinced that human beings originated from several diverse populations in different parts of Africa, positing a Pan-African evolutionary pattern.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.



The Natural History Museum, London/Science Source

Bones of Lucy, a Hominin Ancestor

The researchers who found the skeletal remains of this early hominin named her after the Beatles song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” A member of the *Australopithecus afarensis* species, Lucy is estimated to have lived around 3.2 million years ago. She was about three feet tall, walked upright, and had flexible thumbs and fingers. Lucy is one of many finds that support the idea that Africa was the home of human evolution.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

The skeletal remains include parts of skull, neck bones, the bones in the left and right arm and fingers, the sternum, rib cage, pelvis, and foot.

Current theories of human development also underscore that Africa was where our prehistoric ancestors left the trees to walk upright, learned to make fires and use tools, and developed the capacity for symbolic thinking that defines us as humans. Indeed, according to contemporary “out of Africa” theories of human development, the long evolutionary process that created modern *Homo sapiens* took place largely in Africa. Anatomically modern humans lived and developed new skills and abilities within Africa for more than 100,000 years before beginning to migrate across the rest of the world starting some 70,000 years ago.

Peopling a Continent

As this immensely long history suggests, mobility and migration have always been central to Africa’s history. The continent pumped out countless waves of emigrants who settled the rest of the world, and it is also home to a cultural geography that has been shaped and reshaped by the migratory movements of Africa’s peoples. The continent’s earliest inhabitants were hunter-gatherers who were kept on the move by their method of subsistence. They followed game, tracked down plant foods as they ripened, and handled the scarcities in their food supply caused by competition or climate fluctuations by expanding their traditional hunting grounds. Among them were the San peoples. Estimated to have lived in southern Africa for well over 20,000 years, the San are thought to have been the first fully human inhabitants of the region; they once populated territories that span modern-day Botswana, Namibia, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and South Africa. Other early hunter-gatherers include the Ndorobo of the Kenyan highlands, the Aka or Efe pygmies of Africa’s equatorial forests, and the Hadza and Sandawe of Tanzania.

Like the hunter-gatherers, the earliest people to raise livestock on the continent were also mobile. Originally from the northern end of Botswana, the Khoikhoi are among the most well-known of these groups. Descendants of the San, they diverged from their hunter-gatherer ancestors when they began to rely on domesticated animals rather than game as their primary source of food. However, raising animals on farms on the savannas of Africa is difficult, as water is only intermittently available. Instead, peoples such as the Khoikhoi moved their animals from pasture to pasture, in search of areas where water and food were abundant. The Khoikhoi’s success in supporting their herds this way would lead them to expand into territory well beyond Botswana and ultimately reunite with their San ancestors. Now recognized as the “first nations” of South Africa, today these groups claim a common identity, identifying as Khoisan peoples.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.



Musée de l'Homme, Paris, France/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Domesticated Livestock

This image was painted on rock in the Tassili-n-Ajjer region of Algeria in the second millennium b.c.e. The women in this scene tend cattle, while the children play nearby.

Even since the development of more sedentary forms of food production, Africa's challenging physical environment has fostered continuing movement among its people. Scientists debate exactly when and where the cultivation of domesticated wild grains and legumes first took hold among Africans. Current archeological evidence suggests that Egyptians began growing such crops as early as 6000 b.c.e. In West Africa, the domestication of native plants such as sorghum, millet, and cowpeas began later, first becoming common sometime around 3000 b.c.e. Both of these developments were likely facilitated by cyclical changes in the climate of North Africa and West Africa, which experienced a wet period following the last ice age. Starting around 8000 b.c.e., the retreat of that era's glaciers and ice sheets left behind humid conditions that fostered population growth across both regions. Summer monsoon rains watered even the Sahara, where ancient herders were able to raise livestock, harvest wild grasses and legumes, and develop West Africa's first domesticated crops. Moreover, this climate change continued to reshape life along the Sahara and its borders even when the monsoons began to stop and dry conditions returned.

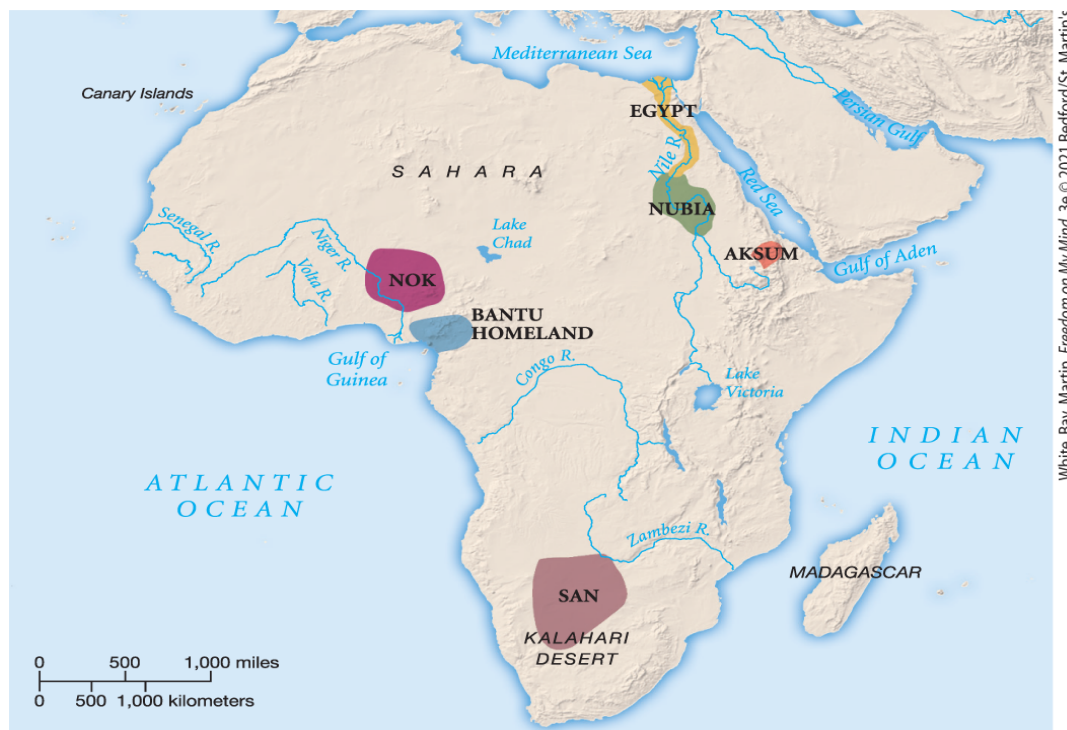
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starting sometime in the fourth millennium b.c.e. As northern Africa dried up, people there began to cluster around the Nile River and valleys in concentrated areas of settlements that would form the foundation for the rise of ancient Egypt — an agricultural empire that depended on the waters of the Nile.

Ancient Societies of Africa

The ancient era saw the development of complex societies around the world. One of the earliest was ancient Egypt. Located in the northeastern corner of Africa, Egypt was the most prominent complex society in the Mediterranean world between its emergence as an empire around 3100 b.c.e. and its conquest by Alexander the Great in 332 b.c.e. Egypt developed a system of hieroglyphic writing around 3200 b.c.e. and was home to some of the world's first city-states and earliest seats of imperial power.

Africa's ancient history begins with the rise of Egypt; however, Egypt was far from the only notable society in ancient Africa (Map 1.2). The millennia during which Egyptian rulers built an empire on the banks of the Nile also saw the emergence of the kingdoms of Nubia, Kush, and Aksum in East Africa and the development of Iron Age societies in West Africa. Meanwhile, migration continued to create new patterns of settlement across much of the continent. Particularly important in this regard was the millennia-long migration of small groups of Bantu-speaking people from southern West Africa to central, eastern, and southern parts of the continent that took place between approximately 3500 b.c.e. and 1100 c.e. Known as the Bantu expansion, this mass movement reshaped the cultural geography of the continent.



MAP 1.2 Ancient Societies of Africa

During the ancient period, Africa was home to some of the world's first large-scale states, as well as societies that pioneered new ones. This map locates some of the earliest world societies that emerged in Africa during the ancient period.

■ **What geographic features do Egypt, Nubia, and Aksum have in common?**

NOK culture prevailed in northern Nigeria along the banks of River Niger, north of the Gulf of Guinea. Bantu Homeland was located along the border of modern-day Nigeria and Cameroon. Ancient Egypt encompassed the regions along the Nile Delta and River Nile in present-day Egypt. The territory of Nubia included areas along the River Nile in what is today's southern Egypt and northern Sudan. The kingdom of Aksum included the regions along the border of modern-day Eritrea and Ethiopia. The SAN territory encompassed the regions south of River Zambezi covering much of present-day Botswana.

Egypt

The most famous African civilization, Egypt, is also the most controversial, at least with regard to the question of who can lay claim to Egypt's lineage and legacy. Although ancient Greek writers such as Herodotus routinely described the Egyptians as "black-skinned with wooly hair," Euro-American thinkers reclassified the Egyptians as a Caucasian people starting in the
Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

nineteenth century. This shift took place when antislavery activists were beginning to point to the accomplishments of the Egyptians to counter claims that people of African descent had never sustained any kind of civilization. White scientists such as Philadelphia's Samuel Morton sought to reclaim white superiority by measuring the skulls of ancient Egyptians and pronouncing them to be Caucasians. While Morton's skull measurements are now considered scientifically meaningless, debates about the race of the ancient Egyptians still persist today — as do arguments over the relative accomplishments of blacks and whites. However, these debates and arguments would have puzzled ancient Egyptians. A heterogeneous blend of North African peoples, the ancient Egyptians knew nothing of modern-day racial categories and did not see themselves as black or white.

But as the following brief sketch of their history will show, the ancient Egyptians created a large, highly complex society that weathered the rise and fall of a variety of different rulers. At the height of its wealth and power, Egypt controlled an empire that extended as far north as modern-day Syria and as far south as modern-day Sudan, and it left behind a rich cultural and artistic legacy. A creative and deeply religious society, Egypt was led by dynasties, or families of royal rulers known historically as pharaohs. The pharaohs honored their gods and commemorated their dead by ordering the construction of monumental pyramids, temples, and obelisks that still survive today.



Vestibule, Tomb of Horemheb, Thebes, Egypt/De Agostini Picture Library/S. Vannini/Bridgeman Images

The Pharaoh and the Goddess

In this mural from an Egyptian tomb, the pharaoh makes an offering to the goddess Hathor-Imentet, whose role is to welcome the deceased. The pharaohs' power came from the belief that they were themselves divinity, members of the sacred universe that controlled Egyptian life.

Egypt took shape on the banks of the Nile and was known among Egyptians as Kemet, or “Black Land,” in honor of the rich dark soil on the Nile’s floodplain. This fertile land was settled beginning around 100,000 years ago and became more crucial to northeastern Africa’s inhabitants over time. Even during arid periods, the river flooded annually, leaving behind a layer of silt that supported agriculture even after the Sahara had turned to desert. Indeed, climate change may well have created population pressures that spurred the rise of Egypt as a unified state. As people migrated from the increasingly dry lands to the most fertile stretches of the Nile, powerful military leaders arose amid the competition between small agrarian communities. In 3150 b.c.e., a powerful leader known as Menes, or Narmer, united the kingdoms of Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt under one king, the pharaoh.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

Egypt was under the control of at least thirty dynasties over the long span of its existence and has a complex political history that scholars typically describe in terms of the rise and fall of three distinct kingdoms. The first of these, the Old Kingdom, saw Egypt establish itself as a great power and also marked the reigns of its great pyramid builders, before ending in a period of decentralization and weak leadership. Then came reunification in the Middle Kingdom, a period in which city-states governed by local rulers recognized the pharaoh as the ultimate source of power. However, after a period of disunity and decline, the Hyksos of West Asia conquered many of these local rulers, gaining control over much of Lower Egypt. They were eventually driven out of Egypt by Ahmose I (reign c. 1570–1544 b.c.e.), founder of the Eighteenth Dynasty, whose rise to power ushered in the New Kingdom. His ascent marked the beginning of an age of empire in which Egypt expanded deeper into Africa along the Nile and also encroached into Southwest Asia.

Religion was essential to the survival and periodic renewal of Egypt's dynastic rule over its long history. Egypt's pharaohs were both the spiritual and political leaders of their people. They governed by divine authority and were understood to serve as intermediaries between the gods and the people. Egypt's dynastic leaders owned its lands, decreed its laws, and led the armies that protected its borders; they also officiated over religious ceremonies and built temples. Considered high priests, the pharaohs were also held responsible for maintaining peace and order in the kingdom, which they did by aligning themselves with powerful deities. Empowered to rule by the gods, they were obligated to maintain their favor with rituals, prayers, and offerings of food, drink, and goods. They also used Egypt's resources to build temples and monuments in the gods' honor. Closely linked to natural forces and phenomena, Egyptian gods included figures that lent power and authority to its rulers. Among the most notable were Horus, a sky god venerated for vanquishing chaos; Maat, the goddess of truth, justice, harmony, and order; and Osiris, who was both the ruler of the underworld and the god of resurrection and fertility.

Egypt's crops and other agricultural riches were taxed on a yearly basis, giving its leaders the means to develop a highly centralized government and support a strong military. Indeed, all of Egypt's most famous achievements occurred under a government that commanded vast resources. The early development of literacy in ancient Egypt, for example, arose out of the administrative and record-keeping needs created by its empire, and its monuments marked the full power of that empire. Constructed during the Old Kingdom, the pyramid complex in Giza and the famous Sphinx required elaborate planning and a workforce of many thousands of people. Much of the unskilled labor was provided by Egyptian peasants, whose work on the pyramids took place during Egypt's flooding season, when farming was impossible. But the construction of the pyramids also required skilled builders and artisans who worked year-round, architects and engineers who did design work, and administrators who procured supplies and coordinated the building work.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

Starting in the first millennium b.c.e., food scarcity, droughts, expensive wars, and civil unrest began to once again fragment Egypt's dynastic rule. As local officials grew more powerful, they challenged the pharaoh's leadership, creating civil conflicts and making Egypt vulnerable to a series of outside invaders. After being conquered by Alexander the Great's Macedonian army in 332 b.c.e., Egypt never fully regained its independence. It was ruled by a new dynasty of Greek rulers after Alexander's death in 323 b.c.e. and became a province of Rome in 30 b.c.e.

Nubia, Kush, and Aksum

As Egypt's prominence declined, the residents of Nubia began to regain independence. Nubia was a region located at the south end of the Nile River, on land now encompassed by southern Egypt and north-central Sudan (see Map 1.2). First settled as early as 8000 b.c.e., Nubia was home to several ancient kingdoms, including Kush, which developed around 3000 b.c.e. The region was more sparsely populated than Egypt.

Kushites and other Nubians had a complex relationship with their powerful northern neighbor Egypt. Nubia was an agricultural region with rich stores of copper and gold; it was also a gateway to the riches of African societies south of its border. The trade goods that Egyptians could acquire there included treasures from the tropics such as ivory, ebony, and panther skins. In times of peace, Nubians did business with Egypt, but Egyptian rulers such as the New Kingdom's Ramesses II (r. 1279–1213 b.c.e.) raided and plundered Nubia. When they did, they seized both goods and people, enslaving the Nubian soldiers they overpowered. The enslaved Nubians were then used as mercenaries in the Pharaoh's armies or as domestic servants in the households of Egyptian noble families. However, Egyptians were also sometimes enslaved in Nubia, which also subjugated its captives of war. Never entirely dominated by its neighbor to the north, Nubia tended to prosper when Egypt was weak. For example, with the collapse of Egypt's New Kingdom at the beginning of the first millennium b.c.e., the Nubian kingdom of Kush not only secured its independence but invaded and conquered Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt. Around 750 b.c.e., the Kushite Piye became pharaoh and established a new line of Kushite dynastic rulers who controlled Egypt for almost a century.

Driven out of Egypt by the Assyrians in 670 b.c.e., the Kushites retreated to Kush, where they retained their independence until about 350, before falling under control of the Kingdom of Aksum (also known as Axum). Located south of Kush (on land now occupied by Eritrea and northern Ethiopia), Aksum rose to power as a naval and trading empire starting around 100 c.e. It took shape around Adulis, a port city on the Red Sea that attracted traders from Egypt, Arabia, the eastern Mediterranean, Persia, and India. At the height of its powers between approximately 300 and 600 c.e., Aksum's empire included present-day Somalia, Djibouti, Somaliland, and portions of the Arabian Peninsula. During this period, it also converted to Christianity, under

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

the leadership of King Ezana (r. 320s–c. 360 c.e.), whose conversion inspired him to declare Aksum a Christian state. Wealthy, powerful, and culturally complex, Aksum developed its own currency and written language, known as Ge'ez. Still used today as the liturgical, or ceremonial, language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Ge'ez is the ancestor of the modern Tigrinya and Tigré languages of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The Nok and the Bantu

The early history of West Africa is far less well documented than that of East Africa. Although settled for almost as long, it was home to small agricultural societies that left behind little direct evidence of their existence. When and where West Africans first began to make and use iron, for example, was unknown until the 1960s, when archeologists working in northeastern Nigeria uncovered iron artifacts and iron slag — one of the by-products of iron production. This discovery suggested that iron smelting and forging technology may have emerged among the Nok people of Nigeria as early as 500 b.c.e. (see Map 1.2). Also skilled in the creation of fired clay objects, the Nok created remarkable terracotta sculptures, many of which depicted near-life-sized human figures. These highly stylized figures typically have oversized heads that feature large triangular eyes with perforated pupils, flared nostrils, and mouths that protrude outward. Most Nok figures feature elaborate hairstyles and ornate jewelry, possibly depicting important people and ancestors. However, little is known about the function of these pieces or about daily life among the people who produced them, whose recorded history is largely limited to the objects they left behind.



Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas/Museum purchase funded by Brown Foundation Accessions
Endowment Fund/Bridgeman Images

Nok Sculpture

Found near the Jos Plateau region of modern Nigeria, this ancient terracotta figure displays the oversized head, stylized facial features, elaborate hairstyle, and bold jewelry characteristic of Nok sculpture. This artifact is a fragment of the original; the complete work likely would have depicted the entire body.

The figurine has a face with large lips, raised eyebrows, a broad nose, and large eyes with a small tiara type crown on the top of the head. It also has heavy jewelry around the neck and bracelets on the right arm. Her chest is unclothed.

Historians have used evidence drawn from archeological studies, linguistic analyses, and oral traditions to track broad patterns in the movement of West Africa's peoples. Among the most

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

important findings is evidence of extensive geographic dispersion among Bantu-speaking people starting around 3500 b.c.e. Much like population shifts that contributed to the rise of ancient Egypt, the migratory movements of the Bantu may have been shaped by climate change along the Sahara, which forced people who had once flourished within its borders to find new territory. The Bantu, an agricultural people who likely originated in the region now occupied by northern Cameroon and southern Nigeria (see Map 1.2), seem to have been pushed out of their original homeland by population pressures related to the drying up of the Sahara's grasslands. And if not, they clearly had other reasons to seek new territory as their migration lasted more than two millennia and resulted in the diffusion of Bantu-speaking agriculturalists across much of sub-Saharan Africa.

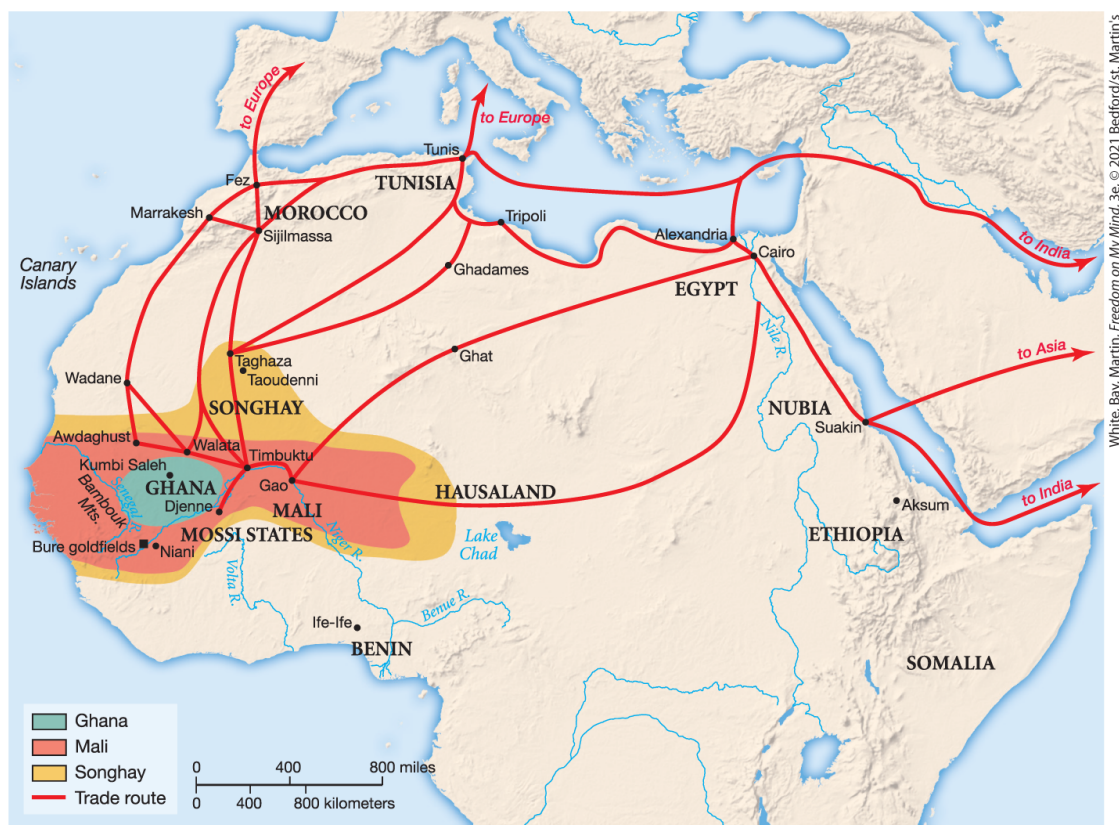
The Bantu expansion saw Bantu speakers fan out of West Africa in at least two distinct waves. Based on linguistic analyses of the spread of the Bantu language, it seems that the first wave saw migrants head east into the Congo forest region and then south through the Great Lakes region and on to present-day Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. The second wave, by contrast, took an entirely different route — or possibly more than one. Second-wave migrants trekked south across central West Africa through modern-day Gabon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola, eventually terminating in modern-day South Africa. In addition, some of these migrants may have traveled south along the tributaries of the Congo River.

Regardless of which route they took, the Bantu travelers helped create new communities and patterns of living. This prolonged and slow migration of small groups of people into new territories extended Bantu languages, crops, agricultural knowhow, and ironworking technology into central, southern, and southeastern Africa; it also introduced the migrants to the customs and expertise of the foragers, herders, and hunter-gatherers who populated these regions. Over time, these exchanges created new communities whose technological skills and methods of food production were enhanced by the combined expertise of both groups. In addition, some local communities adopted new technologies without having direct contact with Bantu migrants in a process of diffusion; other communities may have developed new technologies on their own. Bantu speakers were a linguistic group rather than a united people, and they lived in loose political formations, or clans, organized by lineage, and were open to making alliances with other African peoples. Although rebuffed by some of the central and southern African peoples they encountered on their migration routes, the Bantu were able to join forces with most. They settled in small communities alongside the indigenous residents of the regions, both hunter-gatherers and herders, and they intermarried and intermixed with many of them. Their language ultimately predominated: today approximately one in three Africans is Bantu speaking. However, the Bantu are a thoroughly mixed and culturally diverse people who live in many different African societies; modern Bantu speak 500 distinct Bantu languages and incorporate 400 different ethnic groups.

West Africa's Medieval Empires

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

The decline of the Nile valley civilizations in Egypt, Kush, and Aksum did not mark the end of Africa's age of empires. In fact, the years between approximately 830 and 1645 saw the rise and fall of a series of empires in West Africa (Map 1.3). This period coincides roughly with Europe's medieval era and is sometimes known as West Africa's medieval era. However, while Europe's medieval era began with the dissolution of the Roman empire and its networks of long-distance exchange, West Africa's medieval period saw the formation of larger states and a growth in long-distance networks. With the rise of its medieval empires, West Africa experienced periods of extraordinary prosperity and cultural ferment that were largely fueled by the expansion of its trade routes across the Sahara.



MAP 1.3 Medieval West Africa and the Trans-Saharan Trade

Prior to the era when it became enmeshed in a transatlantic trade with Europe and the Americas, West Africa had a vital place in the trans-Saharan trade. As a result, a number of empires and smaller states and confederacies flourished during this period.

■ Where do these networks extend beyond Africa?

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

Medieval Ghana covers a circular region between the Rivers Senegal and Niger in modern-day southwestern Mali. Medieval Mali expands around Ghana along the Rivers Senegal and Niger including regions of modern-day Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, southern Mali, parts of Burkina Faso and Niger. Medieval Songhay spread around Mali covering the parts of modern-day Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and The Gambia. The major cities marked are Kumbi Saleh in Ghana, Awdaghost, Walata, Timbuktu, Gao, Djenne, and Niani in Mali, and Taghaza, Taudenni in Songhay.

The trade route begins from Djenne, Mali and runs to Spain and Italy in Europe, to Asia and India via Timbuktu, Walata, Awdaghost, Wadane, Taghaza, Marrakesh, Sijilmasa, Fez, Ghadames, Tunis, Tripoli, Ghat, Alexandria, Cairo, and Suakin. The routes also traverse through the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe, and Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean to reach Asia and India.

West Africa's great medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay all took shape along the Sahel, a stretch of semi-arid land that cuts across the continent, dividing the Sahara desert to its north from the Sudanian savanna (grasslands) to its south. Assigned a name that refers to the "shore" of the desert in Arabic, the Sahel is where the Sahara's great sea of sand and rocks comes to an end, and it marked a crucial point of exchange on the trans-Saharan trade routes that began to connect West Africa with North Africa and the Mediterranean world starting around the sixth century b.c.e. There, Berber-speaking merchants could begin to exchange goods with West African merchants. Strategically located, the West African empires that rose to power on the Sahel derived much of their wealth and power from controlling the trade routes across the desert. Moreover, the trade not only enriched the ruling elites of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, it reshaped West African society by forging new cultural, social, and religious connections with other regions of the world.

Ghana

Ghana is one of the first West African states of which there is any record. Located outside the bounds of present-day Ghana in an area now occupied by southeastern Mauritania, western Mali, and eastern Senegal, Ghana sustained a powerful kingdom on the Sahel between approximately 830 and 1230 (see Map 1.3).

People have inhabited Ghana since the Paleolithic era (c. 40,000–30,000 b.c.e.). This region's path to empire began with the formation of a loose confederation of clans among the Soninke, a Mande-speaking group that farmed and raised livestock on the grasslands surrounding the Senegal and Niger Rivers. Their communities grew into large villages, which were governed by chieftains as early as 600 b.c.e. and expanded steadily thereafter.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

The Soninke were one of the first groups to take advantage of the iron technology that developed in West Africa around 500 b.c.e.; they also made early use of horses and camels, acquiring them from the nomads of the Sahara. Traders as well as farmers, the Soninke first rose to power as intermediaries between the Arab and Berber merchants to their north and the producers of gold to the south. They established Kumbi Saleh (or Koumbi Saleh), Ghana's capital, right on the edge of the Sahara, and the city quickly became the most dynamic and important southern terminus for the trans-Saharan trade. The Arab geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi described this site of exchange as crucial to the export of African goods. "Merchants meet in Ghana," he wrote, "and from there one enters the arid wastes towards the land of Gold. Were it not for Ghana, this journey would be impossible, because the land of Gold is in a place isolated from the west in the land of the Sudan. From Ghana the merchants take provisions on the way to the land of Gold."⁶

While gold was much in demand in North Africa, salt was almost equally sought after south of the Sahara. Salt was a rarity in the West African grasslands and forests south of the Sahara, which have few naturally occurring deposits of this mineral. But it is abundant in the Sahara, where the droughts that created the region's vast desert left behind vast salt deposits in areas once covered by water. Indeed, in desert salt mining centers such as Taghaza and Taoudenni, salt was so plentiful that slabs of rock salt were used to build homes. Not surprisingly, these areas supplied Berber traders with one of the commodities most crucial to trans-Saharan trade. So precious that it was sometimes exchanged for gold dust, salt fueled the rise of trade for a number of other goods.

The commodities that West Africans received in return for their gold expanded over time and came to include silver, tin, lead, perfumes, bracelets, books, stone and coral beads, glass jewelry, and drinking implements from southern Morocco and the Byzantine Empire; European and Moroccan cloth and clothing; and horses, books, swords, and chain mail from North Africa. By the fourteenth century, the geographic scope of the trade was immense. Among the new trade goods were cowrie shells from Indian Ocean islands such as the Maldives; these shells began to be used as currency on West African markets.

Meanwhile, the goods that Ghana's traders sent north in exchange grew to include not just gold but also copper, ivory, kola nuts, and animal hides. More troubling, they also sold enslaved people. It is difficult to say exactly when the trans-Saharan slave trade originated, but historians believe it reached its peak between the eighth and sixteenth centuries. A business that took shape around the camel-powered web of trade routes that linked sub-Saharan societies and the Arab world, this trade expanded with the growth of Africa's medieval empire. These societies practiced slavery and enslaved captives of war, and the rise of the trans-Saharan slave trade allowed them to commodify these captives.

All these exchanges enhanced the wealth and power of Ghana's rulers, who taxed their empire's imports and exports. But gold — the preferred metal for coins in both Europe and Southwest

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

Asia — remained the region's most crucial export and Ghana's most important source of wealth and power. Derived largely from gold mines located on the upper Senegal River, Ghana's gold supply was controlled by its Soninke kings, who kept the location of their empire's gold mines a closely guarded secret. They claimed a monopoly over the ownership of the gold nuggets they produced by permitting only gold dust to be freely traded. This policy both enriched them and elevated the market value of gold by limiting its supply.

A rich and powerful trading empire, medieval Ghana reshaped the West African world around it. Its exchange of goods across the Sahara created a variety of other new trans-Saharan connections, most consequentially the expansion of the Islamic religious faith into West Africa.

Originating in early seventh-century Arabia with the prophet Mohammad, Islam spread rapidly across North Africa under the military leadership of Mohammad's successors and reached West Africa primarily by way of the trans-Saharan trade. Most of the North African merchants who participated in the trade were Muslims, as were many of the Berbers who transported its goods. As a result, Muslims became an accepted part of the cultural world of ancient Ghana, especially in key trading sites such as Ghana's capital. Although initially segregated in their own separate neighborhoods, Muslims in cosmopolitan West African cities such as Kumbi Saleh were welcome on both sides of town and even held important positions in its government. Moreover, over time, many of the indigenous residents of Kumbi Saleh and other commercial centers gravitated toward Islam.

Ghana maintained its imperial power for several centuries. At the height of its power, its Soninke rulers commanded a territory that extended from the southern borders of present-day Mauritania to the Bambouk Mountains in present-day Senegal and Mali. They defended their domain with a formidable army, which Arab traveler Al Bakri maintained was capable of putting "200,000 men into the field, more than 40,000 of them archers."⁷ However, the wealth and power of Ghana's rulers continued to depend heavily on their monopoly over Africa's gold trade, which did not last forever. Starting in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, new gold fields began to be mined at Bure (modern Guinea) out of the commercial reach of Ghana, and new trade routes were opening up further east. These changes were all the more disastrous because they came at a time when Ghana was beset by a drought that curbed agricultural production and when it was also divided by a string of civil wars. Impoverished and politically unstable, Ghana became the target of attacks by the Sosso ruler Soumaoro, who conquered many of its peoples. Out of this conflict, Mali emerged in 1235 under a new dynamic ruler, Sundiata Keita.

Mali

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

From the small Malinke kingdom of Kangaba, near the present Mali–Guinea border, came Sundiata, a legendary figure whose name means “lion prince.” The story of his exploits was passed down by generations of griots, or storytellers, whose stories also may have served as inspiration for Disney’s *The Lion King*. Many of the details are impossible to confirm, but the account of his early life in the *Epic of Sundiata* describes him as the twelfth son and sole survivor of Kangaba ruler Nare Maghan. His father and eleven brothers were all killed off by Soumaoro, a cruel ruler who secured his claim to the kingdom of Kangaba by eliminating not only its king but also all of his sons. He spared only Sundiata, who was unable to walk as a child and therefore seemed unlikely to challenge his leadership. Sundiata overcame his disability by sheer willpower and proved equally resolute about reclaiming his father’s kingdom. Exiled after Soumaoro took control of Kangaba, he organized an army by forging alliances with other nearby Malinke peoples and vanquished Soumaoro in the battle of Kirina in 1235. According to the griots, Sundiata prevailed over Soumaoro because he was the more powerful magician of the two. However, modern historians tend to credit Sundiata’s victory to his skills as a military leader and strategist, which are evident in his subsequent career.

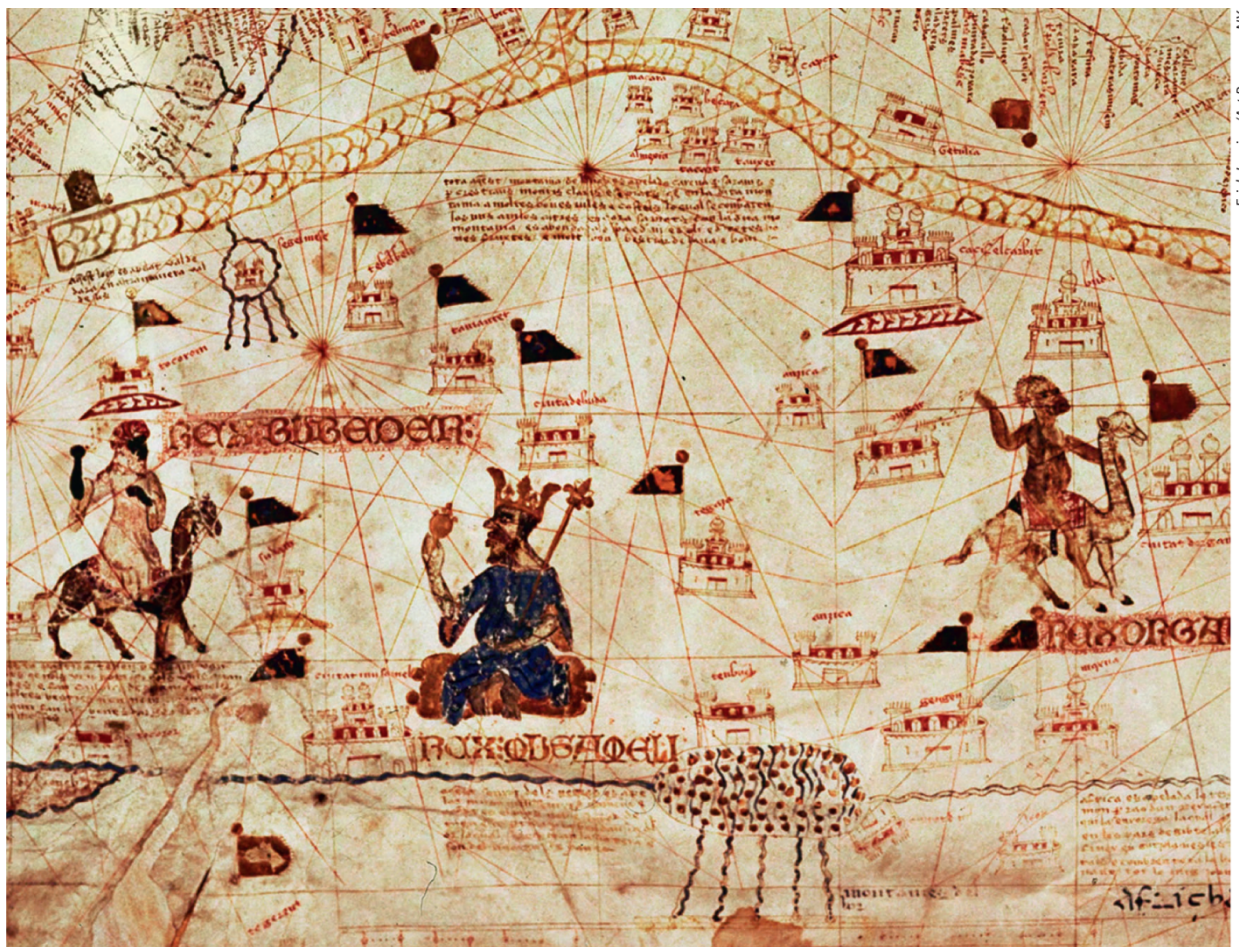
After his initial victory, Sundiata moved quickly to expand his power by founding the empire of Mali (see Map 1.3). After emerging as the leader of the conquered peoples once ruled by the Sossi, Sundiata went on to conquer other states and created an empire even larger and richer than that of ancient Ghana. Centered slightly farther south than Ghana, Mali included all territories once ruled by Ghana as well as the Bure goldfields; the great cities of Timbuktu, Djenne, and Gao on the Niger River; and the salt mines of Taghaza. At its height, it spanned the modern-day countries of Senegal, southern Mauritania, Mali, northern Burkina Faso, western Niger, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, and northern Ghana. Although he rose to power as Mali’s Mansa, or king, Sundiata was not an absolutist monarch. Instead, he set up Mali as a federation of largely autonomous states, led by their own clans and chiefs. Members of a common court all reported to the Mansa but also participated in the Great Gbara Assembly, a deliberative body charged with enforcing the Mansa’s edicts and selecting his successor.

A transitional leader, Sundiata is also notable for finding a way to build bridges between the indigenous beliefs of his ancestors and the Islamic faith of Mali’s North African trading partners. Although Sundiata himself was probably not Muslim, many of his descendants were, and Sundiata cultivated close ties with Muslim trading partners while also retaining spiritual beliefs and powers traditional to his people. Indeed, some scholars see the *Epic of Sundiata*’s account of his magical victory over Soumaoro as a story about the real powers of a leader who managed to command the loyalties of both his region’s Muslim merchant elites and more religiously traditional masses.

Sundiata’s descendants would continue to straddle this divide. His son Mansa Uli converted to Islam and went on a pilgrimage to Mecca around 1260 or 1270 c.e. However, Uli’s conversion did not mark a major shift away from traditional religious beliefs among the empire’s peoples.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

Instead, Islam became the religion of the empire's ruling class, and most of his successors were Muslim and supported the spread of Islam. Most influential in this regard was Mansa Musa I (r. 1312–1337 c.e.), a devout Muslim who became well known throughout Europe and the Middle East as a result of his 1324 pilgrimage to Mecca. He made the four-thousand-mile journey with an opulent personal caravan that included twelve hundred servants and eighty camels carrying two tons of gold, which he distributed to the needy along his route. Musa was thereafter pictured in several European maps of the world, which emphasized his wealth by depicting him wearing a large gold crown and holding a gold nugget and scepter. Not surprisingly, stories of Musa's wealth helped inspire Portuguese explorations of Africa's west coast, which started in the first half of the fifteenth century.



Facsimile of the Catalan Atlas Showing the King of Mali Holding a Gold Nugget, 1375

Largely devoid of geographic detail, this Spanish nautical map of the known world is adorned with pictures, including sketches of camels, as well as a large and lavish illustration of an African ruler identified as “Muse Melley,” “lord of the Negroes of Guinea.” This illustration likely refers

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

to Mansa Musa, who ruled the Mali empire between 1312 and 1337, although his placement on the map is closer to North Africa than to West Africa. A devout Muslim, Musa caught the attention of the Islamic and European worlds in 1324, when he made a pilgrimage to Mecca. His caravan included twelve hundred servants and eighty camels carrying two tons of gold, which he distributed to the needy along his route. Not soon forgotten, Musa was depicted in several fourteenth-century maps of the world.

The atlas shows Mansa Musa of Mali sitting on a throne wearing a European-style crown. He holds a gold scepter in hand and a gold coin in the other hand. On the left, a Tuareg rides on his camel toward the emperor. The Atlas Mountains are at the top of the map and the River Niger at the bottom.

Musa's pilgrimage was also influential in his home, where it fostered closer connections between Mali and the Islamic world. Musa returned from Mecca accompanied by Islamic scholars, bureaucrats, and architects, whose expertise had an enduring impact on his administration's political and aesthetic legacies. Among them was the architect Abu Ishaq Ibrahim Al-Sahili from Granada, who built some of the empire's most important mosques and palaces. His creations included the great mosque at Timbuktu, which is still standing.

Meanwhile, some of the other newcomers boosted Islamic education in Mali by helping Mansu create new universities, libraries, and other institutions dedicated to the study of Islam. It was during his reign that Timbuktu first became a center for Islamic scholarship. A trading town populated by Muslim merchants from throughout the Mediterranean world, it was home to three mosques, 150 Islamic schools, and a flourishing book market. "In Timbuktu there are numerous judges, scholars and priests, all well paid by the king, who greatly honours learned men," sixteenth-century visitor Leo Africanus wrote, describing the book market. "Many manuscript books coming from Barbary are sold. Such sales are more profitable than any other goods."⁸

Sankore Mosque, Timbuktu, Mali



age fotostock/Alamy Stock Photo

This photograph shows the mosque's pyramid-shaped minaret surrounded by mud-brick walls that enclose a courtyard. The mosque is part of the University of Sankore, which is one of several universities that comprise the larger university complex known as the University of Timbuktu.

The spikes are made of bundles of rodier palm sticks. The mud-brick walls enclosing the courtyard extend on either side of the minaret.

However, by the time Africanus, a Berber-Andalusian traveler and author, visited Timbuktu in the early 1500s, Mali had collapsed. Timbuktu remained impressive, but Musa's sons had proved unable to maintain control of either the city or their subjects. In 1468, the Songhay captured Timbuktu and began building a new West African empire.

The Songhay

A group with roots in the Gao region of the Niger River, the Songhay had once been among Mali's subject peoples but were able to reclaim their independence under the leadership of the Sonni dynasty. Like West Africa's previous rulers, the Songhay dynastic leaders were traders and warriors who derived much of their wealth and power from the trans-Saharan trade and who rose to power by gaining control of its traditional routes. Sonni Ali, the dynasty's first ruler, captured much of the Empire of Mali, and one of his successors, Askia al-Hajj Muhammad (r. 1493–1528), expanded its borders north into the Sahara and east into Hausaland (see Map 1.3).

The Songhay rulers created a far more centralized empire than had Ghana's and Mali's rulers. As absolute monarchs, they commanded large armies and developed a highly bureaucratic system of ministers and regional governors to supervise the regions they commanded rather than extending any power or recognition to local rulers. But despite their autocratic powers,

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

Songhay's rulers were never entirely secure. Of the nine kings who ruled the Songhay empire, six were either overthrown in rebellions or killed by their rivals — who were usually close relatives.

Tensions over religion undermined the power of some of Songhay's leaders, who like their predecessors in Mali had to find ways to maintain leadership over the region's Muslim population. Songhay's leaders had to lead the urban elites — without alienating the vast majority of their subjects, who were mostly rural and retained traditional West African religious beliefs and practices. Sonni Ali, who was not a devout Muslim, offended Muslim critics by drinking alcohol and failing to pray in public, and he eventually faced a challenge to his legitimacy from Islamic scholars, who argued that this lack of adherence to Islam made him unfit for his position. This argument did not prevail, but when Ali drowned in the Niger River shortly after his leadership began to be challenged, some of his Muslim critics saw his death as an act of God. His son and successor Sonni Baru faced similar critiques, and he was eventually overthrown by Askia al-Hajj Muhammad, one the empire's generals.

The ascension of Askia al-Hajj Muhammad, a devout Muslim, was a turning point in West African history in so far as it was one of the first documented examples of an African society in that region demanding a leader who met Muslim standards of piety. But Askia's commitment to Islam did not secure the Songhay's command over their region — or convert most of the empire to Islam. Although he established Sharia law and further strengthened Muslim education in Songhay by building schools and expanding Timbuktu's University of Sankore throughout his rule and for many decades afterward, most of Songhay's inhabitants remained small farmers with few ties to their country's Muslim elite.

Indigenous religions and local centers of power persisted in Songhay, making the empire vulnerable to civil wars, imperial rivalries, and outside invaders. In the end, Songhay would fall to all three. In 1528, Askia al-Hajj Muhammad was dethroned by his son, who was later dethroned by his brother, and even though the empire's dynastic conflicts waned during the second half of the sixteenth century, a civil war divided the kingdom again in 1591, opening it up to foreign invasion. That year, Morocco, which had recently fallen under control of the expansionist Islamic dynasty, captured and sacked Timbuktu and other Songhay seats of power, causing the once-powerful empire to collapse. Morocco never secured dominion over the vast territories once controlled by the Songhay, and with their retreat, the region split into many small, independent kingdoms.

With the collapse of Songhay, West Africa lost its most powerful and centralized state during a time when the power balance in the region was already in flux. The Portuguese began exploring Africa's coast in the fifteenth century, and by the sixteenth century, they had established trading centers on West Africa's coast that competed with the region's venerable trans-Saharan trade. The caravans that had so long enriched West Africa's medieval empires would shrink, but the

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

long-distance trade in goods, people, and ideas they pioneered would persist — and set the stage for the transatlantic slave trade.

West Africa in the Sixteenth Century

By the sixteenth century, most of West Africa was populated by many different societies of people who spoke different languages, had diverse cultures, and worshiped different deities. And it was from this diverse world that the first forced migrants to the Americas were uprooted as West Africa became enmeshed in the transatlantic slave trade that began in the early 1500s (the topic of chapter 2).

Religious Beliefs and Practices

Most of the people of sixteenth-century West Africa practiced one of a variety of indigenous religions that recognized many deities and spirits, as well as a more remote, all-powerful creator. Most of these traditional belief systems also attributed life or consciousness to natural objects or phenomena. The Lobi-Dagarti people of southwestern Burkina Faso, for example, worshiped the earth, whose glory they honored by paying respect to sacred stones, and hill spirits; the gods recognized by the Akan people of Ghana and the Ivory Coast include river deities, and the Igbo's spiritual universe included a god of thunder and lightning known as Amadioha ("owner of the sky"). Adherents of these religions saw the force of God in all things and often invoked the spirits of their ancestors, as well as a spirit world associated with their natural surroundings. But these similar beliefs did not lead West Africans to unite around a single church or religious doctrine.

The region also remained home to a significant population of Muslims, who rejected these indigenous beliefs and embraced a strictly monotheistic idea of God. But with the collapse of the Mali and Songhay empires, their influence diminished — at least for a time. Islam remained the religion of West Africa's commercial elite, but Morocco's Islamic leaders were not powerful enough to maintain religious or political control over the vast empire once controlled by the Songhay. Instead, political power in the region splintered, allowing for the survival and resurgence of many smaller kingdoms in which indigenous African religions and customs flourished.

Kinship Ties and Political Alliances

As Europe's age of exploration dawned, only about one-third of the entire African continent was ruled by large-scale organized states. Most people lived in kingdoms of modest size, city-states, or self-governing villages. Self-governing villages, sometimes known as "stateless societies," typically occupied plots of land no larger than a thousand square miles. Due to the tiny size of self-governing villages and the fact that they generated few written records, the history of such societies is not well understood.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

Historians estimate that as many as one-quarter of West Africans lived in such stateless societies.⁹ Especially numerous in both central and coastal West Africa, these societies were typically made up of members of related clans and held together by extended family ties rather than claims to common ethnic identity or nationality. Led by chiefs or councils of elders, most were agricultural societies in which property and political leadership usually passed from generation to generation along matrilineal or patrilineal lines — from mother to daughter or father to son. Examples of stateless societies include Igboland, a densely populated region along the Niger River in what is today southeastern Nigeria, which was home to many self-governing villages. Although the Igbo people who lived there shared a common language, as well as many of the same customs, traditions, and religious beliefs, they never established a central government or coordinating authority. Ties between villages did exist, but they were social rather than political.

West Africa was also home to a variety of larger states in which kinship affiliations led to political affiliations. Larger African politics, such as the kingdoms of the West African interior, were often the product of strategic alliances between closely related royal families. Typical in this regard were the Mossi states, a confederacy of independent kingdoms that took shape in the Upper Volta River region of modern-day Burkina Faso in the middle of the eleventh century (see Map 1.3). This complex of five kingdoms shared kinship ties and a common military and political system, but the kingdoms were otherwise largely autonomous. They came together around the principle of safety in numbers. Their leaders allied to defend their region from attacks by Mali and Songhay and were successful in retaining independence from other powerful neighboring states until the late nineteenth century, when the Mossi states were conquered by the French. Ruled by an emperor and a council of state made up the governors of its kingdoms, the Mossi states had no standing army. Instead, local chiefs led cavalry units that could be rapidly mobilized in times of need. The autonomy achieved by the Mossi states had cultural as well as political import. The Mossi kingdoms were among the few sizable polities in West Africa to remain free of Islamic leadership, and they largely retained their traditional religious and ritual practices.

Much like the Mossi kingdoms, the city-states of Hausaland were a closely allied group of neighbors who shared resources while retaining independence. Indigenous to the Sahel and Sahara, the Hausa were farmers and traders whose traditional villages expanded when their lands became the southern terminus in the Sahara trade. Each of the seven city-states in the Hausa confederation specialized in a product or service essential to participation in that trade. The cotton cloth-producing cities of Kano and Rano became known as the “Chiefs of Indigo.” Biram was the confederation’s original seat of government. Katsina and Daura were known as “Chiefs of the Market” because their geographic location allowed them direct access to the caravans coming across the desert from the north. Gobir, or the “Chief of War,” was the city held responsible for protecting the empire from potential invasive neighbors such as Ghana and

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

Songhay. Zaria, which specialized in acquiring enslaved people for the trans-Saharan trade, was known as the “Chief of Slaves.”

Hausa leadership was based on ancestry and rooted in an oral tradition that traced the origins of the region’s rulers to a common founding family that had seven sons. Less centralized than the Mossi states, the Hausa city-states never conjoined their governments or established an effective army. As a result, they remained vulnerable to domination from outside forces. Several became tributaries of the Songhay empire during the reign of Askia Muhammad (r. 1494–1528 c.e.), and in 1804 all of the Hausa city-states fell under the control of Fulani leader Usman dan Fodio, who established the Sokoto Caliphate.

Benin, Wealth, and Power

Although the Hausa never unified, confederacies among West African peoples could result in the formation of highly centralized states. Sometime before the eleventh century, Edo-speaking people of Yoruba extraction banded together to found the kingdom of Benin, located in what is now southwestern Nigeria (see Map 1.3). According to oral tradition, Benin originated when a group of Edo chiefs asked Prince Oranmiyan of Ife-Ife, a neighboring town ruled by descendants of the divine king of Yorubas, to send them a king. The prince’s son, Eweka, became first in a long line of Benin kings, or obas.

Advised by a group of titled and hereditary chiefs, the obas would become more powerful over time. They successfully laid claim to the divine right of kings and expanded Benin’s borders by mobilizing a well-equipped army that claimed domination over neighboring Yoruba-, Igbo-, and Edo-speaking populations. Notably, their authority, like that of many less powerful West African leaders, remained rooted in an oral tradition that stressed the common lineage of the kingdom’s founders and legitimated its chosen rulers. These ties were also commemorated in the remarkable art created by Benin’s metal workers and carvers, who created sculptures designed to glorify the Oba and to pay homage to the kingdom’s sacred past and collective values. Among these works were magnificent metal plaques hung in the royal palace that depicted the Oba flanked by two or more smaller-scale attendants. These figures offer a vivid sense of the hierarchical nature of the Oba’s royal authority, but the close-knit configuration also suggests that the king’s power relies on the support of his people.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.



Peter Horree/Alamy Stock Photo

The Oba of Benin, with Attendants

This bronze plaque depicts the oba (king), at center, wearing coral beaded regalia and holding the royal scepters. Second to him in scale are two warriors, and other attendants are smaller still, representing their rank. This plaque would have been hung in the royal palace along with others depicting previous obas, providing a visual account of the royal lineage.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

The Oba of Benin, at the center, holds royal scepters in his hands. He wears a high beaded choker, beaded cap with feathers, arm and foot rings, a wrapper with a belt. The two attendants, small figures on either side, carry swords and other weapons. The two warriors, beside the attendants, are depicted as larger figures wearing headgears, wrappers, and jewelry. They hold swords and shields.

As these examples show, West Africa's many states had a variety of sizes and structures, but the region's rulers generally derived power from the network of kinship ties that bound individuals to their communities. The West African proverb "I am because we are, and because we are therefore I am" expresses the collective nature of African social identity.¹⁰

These values were also built into the region's systems of land ownership, which tended to be collective rather than individual. Land held a spiritual significance among West African peoples, who regarded themselves as custodians of the land of their ancestors rather than as owners of any particular plot. Accordingly, their communities formed around common lands whose use was administered by their chiefs or elders. People were entitled to cultivate their ancestral homelands and raise livestock on their community's grasslands, but they did not own any of the land they used, and they could not sell it. Instead, land rights revolved around usage, and families controlled only as much land as they could cultivate. As a result of these arrangements, West African societies tended to figure wealth and power not in land but in people. In these kinship-based societies, land ownership offered no path to private wealth. Instead, close ties with an abundance of people made ruling families powerful, and these ties could be enhanced by institutions, such as slavery, that gave rulers control over people.

Slavery in West Africa

Slavery has ancient roots in Africa, as it does in most other regions of the world. Practiced by the ancient Egyptians and Nubians, slavery likely emerged in some societies in West Africa as early as 300 b.c.e. Slavery in this region could take many forms and had many different points of origin.

In African societies, as elsewhere around the world, enslavement was often a by-product of war. As outsiders, captives had no status in West Africa's kinship-based societies and could be killed with impunity. But with the rise of settled agriculture, conquered people became a valuable source of labor that many African societies chose to exploit. Female captives were particularly valuable because they could be exploited for both their labor and reproductive potential. But enslaved men and women alike were valuable resources to rulers and ruling families whose power lay in their control over large numbers of people. Moreover, as slavery grew more widespread, even enemies who might once have been regarded as too dangerous to be enslaved gained market value. Captives with allies nearby and powerful warriors who might be difficult to subdue could be sold off to distant lands.

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

As the slave trade became a source of revenue, some African rulers relied on the sale of enslaved captives to boost their military power by procuring horses, weapons, and other military necessities; other rulers used those who were enslaved as soldiers. Usually conscripted into permanent military service at an early age, such soldiers provided crucial support to the armies in which they served and could rise to positions of high rank. The use of slaves to fund or wage war was particularly common in the Islamic world and helped fuel the rise of a trans-Saharan trade in which Arab merchants purchased slaves as well as gold; the West African rulers of Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and other states sold their captives of war to fund their armies and maintain and expand their power.

But war was not the only route to enslavement. In many West African societies, slave status was assigned to those convicted of serious crimes such as adultery, murder, or sorcery. People reduced to slavery for these crimes not only lost their freedom but were usually sold away from their families as well — a harsh punishment in these kinship-based societies. Debtors were also enslaved. Some were pawns, debtors who voluntarily submitted to temporary slavery in order to pay off their debts.

Members of most of these groups could move in and out of slavery, although not all of them succeeded in doing so. Pawns, for example, could work off their debts, while female captives of war frequently became members of their owners' families via concubinage — a form of sexual slavery that typically ended in freedom if the concubine bore a freeman's child. Two other routes out of slavery were assimilation into an owner's kinship network by marriage and manumission — a legal process that slave owners could initiate to grant freedom to a favored slave.

In West Africa, since slave status was rarely inherited, slavery did not create a permanent class of slaves or slave owners. Indeed, in years immediately leading to the arrival of Europeans in the 1440s, slave ownership and slave trading were relatively modest sources of wealth in West African societies. West Africans had long sold enslaved people to slave traders, who transported them across the Sahara to North Africa for resale in the Arab world, but this trans-Saharan trade did not expand greatly over time. Likewise, the expansion of slavery within West Africa was limited by the decentralized character of the region's political regimes and its lack of commerce in slave-produced goods. Agriculture was a collective pursuit dedicated to subsistence rather than trade, and it did not require the harsh work regimes that would come to characterize slave labor in the Americas.

Slaves in African societies were socially marginal and powerless, but there were limits to their subjugation. As elsewhere, enslaved people in West Africa suffered a loss of social status that was nothing less than "social death" in these kinship-based societies.¹¹ But slaves were generally employed in the same agricultural and domestic work that occupied other members of these small communities. Indeed, according to Olaudah Equiano, an eighteenth-century African who

Source: White, Deborah G., et al. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.

experienced slavery both in his homeland and in European colonies, African captives do “no more work than other member of the community including their master. Their food, clothing and lodging were nearly the same as theirs, except that they were not permitted to eat with the free born.”¹² They also retained a number of civic rights and privileges. In most African communities, slaves were permitted to educate themselves and were generally able to marry and raise children. Slavery also varied across the region, sometimes taking the form of domestic servitude, in which female slaves predominated. Larger West African polities such as Songhay employed slave soldiers and bureaucrats, whose slave status did not keep them from becoming wealthy and powerful servants of the state.

However different African slavery was from the slavery that developed in the Americas, the fact that it was an entrenched and dynamic institution would have tragic and far-reaching consequences. The European trade with West Africa, which began shortly before Europeans first crossed the Atlantic, would create a new kind of slave trade to supply the workers needed to exploit these new lands.

CONCLUSION

Transatlantic Ties

With the rise of the transatlantic slave trade, millions of Africans entered an enforced migration that led to generations in slavery. Generations of West African captives left their homelands behind and became diasporic Africans, whose ties to the countries of their birth were attenuated by time, distance, and the many hardships they faced in the Americas. Yet Africa and the idea of Africa traveled with them and often served as a source of comfort and strength to enslaved Africans and their American-born descendants. From many different homelands, Africans in the Americas left behind loved ones and the communities in which they were raised, but they also nourished ties to Africa that they passed on to their descendants. (See Document Project: *Imagining Africa*, pp. 31–35.)