

# Africa: The Enduring Continent

The continent of Africa provides many challenges to the people who live there. Africa's hot climate is one severe challenge. Most of the continent is open grassland, and the vast majority of Africa's soils are poor and not suitable for farming. Africa has many tropical diseases and voracious insects that torment the inhabitants of most areas of the continent. The Sahara, a huge desert, lies just south of the North African coast, making transportation by land from north to south extremely difficult. Also, since water is hard to obtain in many parts of Africa (not just the vast deserts), settled life is very difficult. With these challenges, the African peoples --- both present and past --- require fortitude, toughness, and teamwork just to survive.

## The Geography of Africa

Africa is the second largest continent in the world. It is so huge that the United States, Europe, India, and Japan could easily fit into Africa with space left over. Oceans surround Africa on all sides, except for a small land bridge that connects it to Asia. The equator runs through the middle of the African continent, and all the areas of the continent are hot. In the center of the continent and along the western coast are the famous jungles of Africa.

Africa may be divided into six broad areas: North Africa, the Sahara Desert, West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, and southern Africa.

**North Africa** is the part of Africa that touches the Mediterranean Sea. Its civilization has always been part of the greater Mediterranean world. The Nile Delta that was so important to ancient Egyptian civilization is part of the North African world. Along with Egypt, ancient Phoenicia, Greece, and Rome made North Africa part of the ancient civilized world. Later, in the 7th century, Muslim Arabs conquered the entire area. Because of its history, North Africa has developed differently from the rest of Africa. The modern-day countries that make up this area are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

**The Sahara** lies below Africa's fertile and inhabited northern coast. The Sahara is by far the largest desert in the world and stretches from the Atlantic Ocean on the west to the Red Sea on the east. It covers three and one-half million square miles. The Sahara was once a grassland, or savanna, before the end of the last ice age. There is evidence that people in the Sahara once lived in tribes as nomadic herdsmen. As the ice age came to an end, the earth's climate changed, and hot, dry winds turned much of the Sahara into sand wastes. Today, the southern portions of Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt, the northern half of Sudan, as well as most of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad, lie within the Sahara Desert.

**West Africa** is the region of the west coast of Africa, south of the Sahara, to just north of the equator, and eastward to Lake Chad. This fertile and rich area contains grasslands, rain forests, and farmlands. Many small states lie on the western coast of Africa: Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Nigeria.

**East Africa** has high mountains that separate it from the Sahara to the north and west, and from the rain forests of western and Central Africa. The Great Rift valley, which runs down East Africa from north to south, is the meeting place of the African and Indian continental plates. Volcanoes are still active there. Mount Kilimanjaro is an active and growing volcano in Kenya as well as the highest mountain in Africa. The farmlands of this region are very fertile because of the rich volcanic soil of the mountains and the warm but wet climate. The countries of East Africa are Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. East Africa is the home of two of the earliest African civilizations, Kush and Ethiopia.

**Central Africa** is the very large region drained by the Congo River, flowing west to the Atlantic, and the Zambezi River, flowing east to the Indian Ocean. The equator runs through Central Africa, and it contains thick forest jungles. Beyond the forested areas are bands of grassy savannas.

**Southern Africa** is drier than Central Africa and less mountainous than East Africa. The Kalahari Desert divides it from its neighbors to the north. Southern Africa contains the nations of Namibia, the Republic of South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Swaziland. Southern Africa is rich in minerals and developed farmland. The Republic of South Africa has industry like Europe and North America along with modern cities and transportation. Southern Africa is home to the Bushmen, a people that roamed the whole continent and parts of Europe in prehistoric times but now live only on the fringes of the Kalahari Desert.

## **The Lakes and Major Rivers of Africa**

In the deep chasms of the Great Rift valley in the eastern part of central Africa stand three large lakes: Lake Victoria, Lake Tanganyika, and Lake Malawi. The largest of the lakes is Lake Victoria, which is almost an inland sea, between Kenya and Uganda. Lake Victoria is only slightly smaller than Lake Superior in North America. The waters of Lake Victoria are the source of the southern branch of the Nile River. Lake Tanganyika drains west into tributaries of the Congo, and Lake Malawi drains south and east into the Zambezi River. These three lakes are high in the mountains and provide water for the lowlands below.

Four major rivers are an important part of the geography of Africa: the Nile, the Congo, the Niger, and the Zambezi. Although it is not a major river, the Okovango River

in Botswana is very interesting, for it never reaches the sea. Instead, it ends in swamps in the Kalahari Desert in South Africa.

**The Nile** is the longest river in Africa, flowing approximately 4,160 miles from its farthest source until it reaches the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile starts in two places and for many miles has two branches: the western branch, called the White Nile, and the

**headwaters:** the sources or the upper parts of a river

eastern branch, called the Blue Nile. The **headwaters** of the White Nile are at Lake Victoria in the mountains of Uganda. The Blue Nile begins at Lake Tana, in Ethiopia. The two branches flow northward until they meet at Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. From Khartoum, the Nile continues its long journey to the Mediterranean Sea.

The Nile provides water for living and farming for those on its banks. For centuries, it deposited the silt that made the Nile River Valley and the Nile Delta in Egypt some of the richest farmland in the world.

**The Congo** is the second longest river in Africa. It begins in the Katanga plateau in southern Africa and flows northward to the central part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The river then turns south and west and flows to the Atlantic Ocean. The Congo River does not form a delta like the Nile does but runs through a deep canyon to the ocean. The Congo River is the highway of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. From dugouts piloted by village people to modern riverboats and huge commercial transports, the Congo makes movement possible in the dense rain forests of Central Africa.

**The Niger** is Africa's third longest river. It begins in Guinea in West Africa and first flows northeast through Mali. It then turns south and flows through Benin and Nigeria, ending its journey to the sea at a large delta in Nigeria. This river is very important to the people of West Africa who live on its banks. Water from the river allows farming and commercial fishing.

**The Zambezi** is the fourth of the great rivers of Africa. It flows east from the same high country where the Nile and the Congo begin. It passes through thick forests in Zambia and Mozambique and at last empties into the Indian Ocean.

## African Resources and Food

Africa's most valuable resources are fossil fuels (such as oil and coal) and precious jewels, and metals, including abundant copper and gold.

Staple African foods --- peanuts, sweet potatoes, okra --- are so much a part of the cuisine of all lands today that their origin is unknown to most people. A world without the humble peanut and peanut butter is unthinkable. The sweet

potato is used in many recipes. Okra and filé (a spice made from dried and ground sassafras leaves) are the essential ingredients in gumbo, and blackened meat and fish are now popular in all parts of North America.

## The African Peoples and their Cultures

Scientists say that Africa was the first home to all members of the human race, and from Africa our ancestors spread throughout the entire world. Roughly 30,000 years ago, human beings living in Africa were making sophisticated stone tools. These Africans were the Afro-Asians, Bantus, Pygmies, and Bushmen. They are ancestors of the peoples who are found on the continent today.

**The Afro-Asians** are ancestors of the people who live in northern Africa. They had light brown skin and were of medium height. Some older books refer to these people as “Caucasoid” or “Hamitic,” but the term we use today is *Afro-Asian*.

**The Bantu** peoples have lived in the sub-Saharan plateau and along the fringe of the forest region. They are tall, large framed, dark ebony in skin color, and have wiry, tightly curled black hair. They are now called the blacks, or Bantu, and inhabit most of the continent today.

**The Pygmies** are similar to the Bantu except for their small stature --- they are only about four and one-half feet tall. They have inhabited forest regions around the Congo basin and now are few in number. They have always lived by hunting and planting small plots of vegetables and maize.

**The Bushmen** have made their homes in Africa’s eastern and southern savannas. They are slight of build, of medium height, and have light, copper-colored skin. Their eyes are almond-shaped, like the eyes of East Asian peoples, and they have tightly curled dark hair. The Bushmen are a nomadic people, living by hunting and gathering only. Farming is still not their ordinary practice. Their paintings on the rock faces of cliffs and outcroppings of stone are very like the prehistoric paintings in the caves of Europe.

## A Religious Family Culture

Family and community are of the highest importance for all African societies. African peoples have believed it is one’s duty to serve his group. Not only rich ancient cultures like Christian Ethiopia but less developed tribal societies have looked upon the good of the whole community as greater than what benefits individuals alone.

Working together has thus been an important part of African culture. A French traveler to Ethiopia in the 1830s noted that the Ethiopian Africans were proud of their

spirit of cooperation: "A man with no fixed obligation to his society was, in their eyes, outside of society," he said.

Most black African peoples have always believed in a supreme being, a creator god who takes special care of human beings, who are his special creation. Because of this belief, it was not difficult for Africans to accept the monotheism of Islam and the Christian Faith. Africans, of course, worshiped other gods --- spirits of nature and the elements. When Africans became Muslim or Christian, they often confused these gods with Christian saints or Islamic angels and prayed to them as if they were gods. African religions thus could be a mixture of paganism and Christian or Muslim beliefs.

African religion today still includes all the acts of daily life; every human action is thought to have a religious significance. Ceremony and ritual mark the great events of life: birth, marriage, successes and failures, and death. People offer things precious to the worshiper or sacred to a spirit to recognize the important event or the on-going life of the family. Special gifts are traditionally given to each god, including animal sacrifice and (at one time) human sacrifice. Whiskey and corn meal are the traditional gifts people offer to the ancestors of the family.

## **Africa's Earliest Civilizations**

Around 5500 B.C., the climate of the Sahara was wet and cool. Its grasslands were lush, and rivers ran across them southward into the Niger River and eastward toward the Nile River. (The dry riverbeds can still be seen in the desert.) Fish and game were plentiful, and generations of hunters and herdsman lived comfortable lives. Then around 3000 to 2500 B.C. the climate changed. The rains stopped. The rivers dried up. The forests and grasses died.

The long disaster of the drying up of the Sahara helps explain the history of Africa after 2000 B.C. The peoples who lived in the once-bountiful Sahara migrated in three directions. Some went north to the coasts of the Mediterranean; some went east to the fertile valley of the Nile; and some went south into the heart of the continent.

In the Nile River Valley, the civilization of Egypt emerged. South of the Sahara Desert, people were cut off from the ideas of the peoples of the Mediterranean. They had to cope with heat, poor soil, dense jungles, and barren mountain slopes. The deep and broad rivers were full of predators and parasites. Everywhere, insects brought disease with their stings and bites.

## **The Kingdoms of the Nile**

Egypt was the first civilization in Africa, and it may have influenced two other kingdoms that grew up along the Nile River --- the kingdoms of Kush and Axum. These kingdoms lay to the south of Egypt and included the lands of the modern states of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea.

Around 750 B.C., the princes of Kush made their capital at Napata, near the upper reaches of the Nile, and built a city influenced by Egyptian building styles. Greek writers referred to Kush as *Aethiopia* (Land of the Fire-Eyes) and called the Kushites, *Ethiopes*; but Kush lay to the north of what is today the nation of Ethiopia.

For a thousand years, the Kushites waged constant war with the Egyptians. Because of this contact with Egypt, the Kushites developed a civilization that looked Egyptian but had its own unique character. The Kushites, for instance, worshiped the Egyptian god Amun just as the pharaoh's court did; but the Kushites did not worship their king as a god as the Egyptians did the pharaoh.

Later, as the Sahara grew ever more dry and the pastures around Napata dried up, the Kushites shifted their capital farther south to Meroe and there built palaces and stone cities. In Meroe, the kings built pyramids that were not as grand as the pyramids of Egypt but nonetheless had a remarkable style and dignity. Iron was abundant around Meroe, and the kings of Kush made great use of the technology of iron working. The capital grew into a great metalworking center. Heaps of iron waste may still be seen in the ruins. The kings of Kush conquered their old foes, the pharaohs, in the 8th century B.C. and for a brief time ruled both Upper (southern) and Lower (northern) Egypt.

The Kushites managed to tame the African elephant and they used elephants in war. In their art, they replaced pictures of Egyptian gods with those of lions and elephants. The kingdom of Kush loved new things and sent **emissaries** to all the lands of the Mediterranean. Kushite ships sailed from ports on the Red Sea as far as India. The Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:26-40) in the Bible tells of how the deacon Philip met an official of the queen of Meroe on the road from Jerusalem and told him the Gospel of the Lord Jesus. The Bible calls the official an Ethiopian.

**emissary:** a person who is sent on an errand or mission

## The Kingdom of Nubia

Around A.D. 300, both the kingdom of Kush and the Kushite civilization seem to have faded after wild Nubian tribes and the kings of Axum, a realm in what is now called Ethiopia, invaded their lands. No one knows how Kush came to an end. The last king of the Kushites was buried in a tiny pyramid, a sad imitation of the tombs his ancestors had built. His name was Malequerabar. That is all that we know of him.

Two hundred years later, in the 500s A.D., the Nubian invaders in the Kushite towns produced their own culture, Christian Nubia. In the 300s or 400s, monks from a region of Egypt called the Thebaid had brought the Christian Faith to Nubia, and a Church was established there that had many of the same rituals as the Church in Egypt. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, this Church adopted a heresy called *Monophysite*. The Monophysites taught that Christ is only truly God, not man. In Egypt, the Monophysite Church is called Coptic, after the ancient language used in its liturgy.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Church in Nubia was cut off from the rest of the Christian world by the Muslim conquest of Egypt. For centuries thereafter, Nubia's Christian

kings and bishops knew nothing of the developments of the Christian world of Europe or Constantinople. Believing the rest of the world had fallen to the Muslims, they thought they alone were left to keep the Christian Faith alive. Nubian kings made constant war on the Muslim governors of Upper Egypt and declared themselves the protectors of Egypt's Coptic Christians.

Finally, the Muslims of Egypt under the sultan, Saladin, sent troops south to stamp out the Nubian nuisance. In 1276, the Muslims overcame the first of three Nubian kingdoms, and a second kingdom fell a century later. The last of the Nubian Christian kingdoms fell to the Muslims in the early 1400s. For nine hundred years, the Nubians of old Kush had held out against the Muslim armies.

## Axum

The kingdom of Axum arose to the south and east of Kush, in the mountains of Ethiopia. There is an Ethiopian legend that tells a strange legend about the people of Axum. The legend relates that the queen of Sheba, mentioned in the Bible, went up to Jerusalem to judge the reputation of Israel's King Solomon for wisdom. (1 Kings 10:1-13) There, Solomon fell in love with her, and she bore him a son whose name was Menelik.

The legend says that Menelik's relatives harassed him as he grew up, and he was forced to flee Sheba with the treasures that had belonged to his mother and father. He led his band of warriors into the mountains of Ethiopia, where he founded a kingdom and worshiped God like the Israelites did. Among the treasures Menelik took with him was Israel's sacred Ark of the Covenant. Solomon's Israelite son, says the legend, sent the ark to his half-brother, Menelik, to keep it safe. The legend says this Menelik became the founder of Ethiopia's line of kings. This royal line ruled Ethiopia into the 20th century. Its last emperor was Haile Selassie.

The legend of the queen of Sheba and her son, Menelik, is based on real history. "Sheba" is the land of the Sabaeans, a people who lived on the southern coast of Arabia. The Sabaeans set up trading posts on the African coast near their homeland. About 500 years before Christ, a number of Sabaean settlements on the African coast near the mouth of the Red Sea merged with the local peoples to develop a culture all their own. These peoples moved inland into the sparsely settled mountains of Ethiopia and built a city there safe from Red Sea pirates and wandering nomadic tribes. By A.D. 200, the city was called Axum, and the people of the mountains that it commanded were called Amharic.

The first Christian missionary to reach Axum was St. Frumentius --- St. Athanasius of Alexandria, the great defender of the Trinity, had ordained Frumentius bishop of Axum around the year 330. In the 500s, a Monophysite priest, named Julian, was sent from Alexandria by the Byzantine empress Theodora (Emperor Justinian's wife) to Nubia and Axum to convert them to his heresy. Since then, the Church in Ethiopia has been Monophysite. In an extraordinary report to Constantinople, Julian said that the Christian king of Axum was dressed in white linen, adorned with gold and

pearls and that his throne was a gilded chariot drawn by elephants. Julian claimed that Greek was the language of the Amharic court!

Whether the court spoke Greek or not, Ethiopia had its own literature written in Geez, a **literary language** spoken by the nobles and upper classes of Axum. Ethiopia even had its own translation of the Scriptures into Geez.

Axum also had unique architecture. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Axum's king, Lalibela, built some of the most unusual structures in the world. They were 10 churches chiseled out of the rock of the hills around his capital. Workers excavated down into the rock, hewing out a large, rectangular pit. In the center of this pit sits the church, sculpted out of a single rock. The roof of the church is level with the ground outside the pit. Within the churches, artisans carved out huge halls with pillars and arches, false windows and hidden rooms, just as if the churches had been erected above ground.

As with Nubia, the Muslim conquests cut Axum off from the rest of the Christian world. By the 1200s, Muslims and primitive pagan tribes surrounded the mountain kingdom, and Christian travelers from the mountains were forbidden to use ports on the Red Sea coast.

**literary language:** a form of a language that is more elegant than everyday speech

## The Sudanic Civilization

Fighting to survive in the hostile climates and terrain of the continent, African societies came up with different ways of staying alive and living joyfully. Like the Ethiopians, Africans south of the Sahara Desert (the area called Sudan by the Arabs) developed a unique culture we call the Sudanic civilization.

The Sudanic societies were tribes (which might be quite small or large), ruled by a king. Because the king was thought to be divine, he was kept from contact with the rest of the tribe. It was thought that the king needed to keep healthy to insure good weather and crops. The office of king was not passed down in families, from father to

### Burial of a Sudanic King

Kings in Sudanic cultures were not allowed to die a natural death, for the people thought that if a king died a natural death, the land would lose its fertility. Poisoning or ritual suffocation were used to hasten death when a king's time to die was near. The king would be buried with his favorite furniture, food, and the bodies of his servants and aides.

son. Instead, the king was the head priest, and the priestly class chose the king by election or magical **divination**.

Because Sudanic societies thought their king was a divine being, he ruled his people with absolute power. His subjects provided him with wives, drink, food, crafts, and items for trade. He also controlled all trade.

**divination:** the practice of trying to discover future events or hidden knowledge by means of magic

This Sudanic order of society influenced all the peoples of West and Central Africa. It became the model for all the Bantu kingdoms of central and southern Africa.

The wealth and power of the kingdoms of the Sudan were built on gold, which can be found in great abundance in West Africa. In ancient times, the Africans had traded gold with the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians, and when the Arabs conquered North Africa in the 7th century, this trade continued. In particular, the Africans of Sudan traded gold for salt, which was priceless to the Africans. On trains of camels, the Arabs carried tons of salt to the south and brought home gold beyond their dreams. Salt was not only useful to make foods savory; it was essential for health among peoples who lost so much water through heavy perspiration in the intense heat.

Another Sudanic “product” that was not so savory was slaves. The great kingdoms of the Sudan conquered their neighbors to accumulate the gold and slaves that the traders demanded for their salt. Empires rose and fell as price of salt and slaves went up or down.

Along with Arab merchants came Muslim teachers who converted the pagan tribes of the Sudan to Islam. The cities that grew up as trading centers and royal capitals in the Sudan became centers of Islamic learning. One such Islamic center, Timbuktu, grew world famous.

The empires of the Sudan also inspired the kingdoms on the forested western coasts of Africa to expand their borders and conquer their neighbors. The kings of Benin and Ashanti resisted Islam but waged wars to capture slaves to sell to the Muslim lands in North Africa. By the 1600s, the coastal kingdoms of West Africa were ready to trade with Europeans for gold and slaves, just as they long had done with their Muslim neighbors.

## The Empires of the Sudan

Much of what we know about the history of medieval West Africa we have learned through accounts written by Muslims from North Africa. West African “literature” was primarily oral --- that is, it was unwritten but passed down through memory and recitation. This oral literature took the form of storytelling in tales, heroic poetry, epics, and histories. West African oral literature took the form of riddles, lyric poems, and proverbs. Through these --- as well through the written literature in both the African

languages and Arabic --- the Sudanic peoples passed down their memories from generation to generation.

When Muslims first encountered the Sudanic peoples in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., they found towns and cities surrounded by well-developed farmlands. The peoples of West Africa had a system of markets and carried on trade with one another. Though West Africa had tribal forms of government, it also had highly developed monarchies that grew up into empires. Four Sudanic kingdoms that grew into empires between A.D. 700 and 1800 were Ghana (not the modern country with that name), 700–1200; Mali (again, not the modern country), 1200–1500; Songhai, 1350–1600; and Kanem-Bornu, 800–1800.

The great Sudanic monarchies did not grow up in more fertile regions, such as the Niger River valley and around Lake Chad, but in the less fertile and drier lands that lie between these more fertile regions and the Sahara Desert. This indicates that these monarchies grew powerful through trade with the lands that lay along the Mediterranean coasts of North Africa. As the kingdoms grew wealthier, they extended their power over their neighbors from whom they obtained money (from taxes and tribute) as well as slaves for trade.

## Ghana

A kingdom called Ghana arose in the region along the border of what are now Mauritania and Mali. The lands of Ghana had a large population that supported itself by farming, irrigating crops by water obtained from wells. The king of Ghana lived in a walled palace and maintained a court that displayed his great power and wealth. The king's wealth came from a trade in gold (which came from further south) and slaves, as well as from taxes exacted from kings over whom his sway extended.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Ghana's power began to extend over the nomadic tribes that lived to the north of the kingdom. These tribes, which lived by cattle raising, were disunited and so could not resist the power of the more powerful Ghana kingdom. Yet, these nomads had also been converted to Islam, a religion that allowed them to unite, in spite of their differences. It was under the zealous Muslim religious group called the Almoravids that these tribes united and began to expand their sway over the agricultural lands that lie on either side of the western Sahara and northward into Spain. Late in the 11<sup>th</sup> century it seems the Almoravids dominated Ghana itself. From that time onward the ruling and merchant classes of Ghana were Muslim, though paganism continued among the common people.

Throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Ghana empire grew ever weaker while the southern kingdoms that empire had dominated achieved their independence. One such kingdom was Mali, which lay in the well-watered and gold-rich lands of the upper Niger River valley. By around 1235, Mali had grown powerful enough to conquer what remained of Ghana.

## Mali and the Spread of Islam

The kingdom of Mali controlled not only the gold fields of the upper Niger River valley but the Niger River trade cities of Gao and Timbuktu. Controlling these cities allowed Mali to open up trade with other parts of West Africa. Up and down the river traveled merchants, who expanded their trade as far east as the lands of a Bantu people called the Hausa, who lived between Lake Chad and the Niger. The merchants soon were carrying their trade further south, along the Black Volta River and into what is now the modern African state of Ghana.

The Mali merchants, however, not only carried on trade but also took their Muslim religion with them. Because of their activities, Islam spread among the merchant classes of West Africa, and West African kings adopted the new religion. Though West African society remained basically pagan, it began to be highly influenced by the religion of the prophet Muhammad.

One effect of the expansion of Islam was the spread of the Arabic language in West Africa. Arabic was the language of Islam; Muslims of whatever race and language were expected to learn Arabic in order to read the Koran. In West Africa, Arabic became the language of trade and government, as well as of culture and learning. Arabic was for West Africa what Latin was for medieval Europe --- the language of religion and scholarship and the means of uniting the disparate peoples of the region.

The use of Arabic spread literacy among the Sudanic peoples and brought them into contact with the riches of Muslim scholarship. Black Muslim scholars not only studied works of Muslim learning but produced learned works of their own. West Africa became rich not only with gold but numerous poets, historians, and scholars.

## Songhai

The Bantu people called the Songhai lived on the middle Niger River and had long made it difficult for Mali to control that region, which included the important trading city of Gao. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Mali lost control of Gao and, in the same century, a Songhai king arose who brought Mali's empire to an end. This king was Sonni Ali (r. 1464-1492), who rose up as a champion of his people's pagan religion against the Muslim faith of the Mali kings.

Fighting war after war against the Mali kingdom, Sonni Ali at last overthrew it and established his own empire, which he ruled from Gao. After Sonni Ali's death, however, the Songhai kingdom fell to one of his generals, Muhammad Askia (r. 1493-1528), who was not a Songhai pagan but a Muslim from the people of Mali. From this time forward, the Mali and Songhai continually struggled for control of the empire.

Yet, despite these struggles, the Songhai empire grew in power and influence. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was strong enough to carry war and conquest into the Sahara to take control of the salt mines in the region. Such conquests, however, brought Songhai rule too close to the borders of the North African state of Morocco. In 1591, armed with

## The Slave Trade

In the 17th century, European colonists in the Americas demanded more and more slaves to work on their farms and plantations. To obtain slaves, European traders turned to West Africa. Many African chiefs collected slaves from their neighbors inland, and traded them to slave traders on the coast in exchange for guns and other goods. Tribesmen convicted of a crime or who had debts (or whose family had debts) or whose chief did not like them, could be sold as slaves. When slaves became more valuable than gold, African kings on the coast made war on weaker neighbors to capture whole villages or peoples to sell to the slavers. The slaving wars disrupted Sudanic life and tribal allegiances for centuries.

The slave trade affected both eastern and western Africa. Arab slave traders on the east coasts set up slave-trading towns from Somalia to Mozambique. But the coming of the Europeans in the 1400s had the most destructive effect on African society, since the new plantations of Brazil and the Caribbean Islands seemed to have an endless appetite for new slave labor. The Portuguese, who had first explored the African coasts, stepped in to control the slave trade.

It is impossible to describe the horror of African slavery. Usually betrayed by a rival tribe, people were separated from their families and cultures, never to know them again. Then they were loaded aboard ships with too little air and space. If they survived the long trip across the ocean (and many did not), most slaves became agricultural workers with no rights, no pay, and no chance for improvement. Access to slaving areas was restricted, for it was feared that if Europeans not involved in the slave trade were to see it, it would be stopped.

The effects of the slave trade varied from place to place in Africa. Western Africa, with a large population, did not suffer terribly from the loss of people. But slaving harmed African morality, for it weakened family ties and damaged communities. In Central and East Africa, however, the loss of population was devastating. Slaving took its toll on those left behind. Villages starved because their young men and women were no longer there to work the fields.

firearms, a 4,000-strong Moroccan army invaded Songhai and conquered the cities of Jenne, Timbuktu, and Gao. This conquest brought an end to the Songhai kingdom.

## The Kingdom of Kongo

In 1482, the Portuguese adventurer Diego Cão, sailing down the west coast of Africa, became the first European to make contact with the kingdom of Kongo --- the largest kingdom in Central Africa. Portuguese interest in Kongo grew rapidly. And the kings and nobles of Kongo found everything European fascinating. They entered into trade with the Portuguese for European cloth, tools, furniture, and wine. They offered high wages to Portuguese carpenters and masons to come and build new palaces and cities for the African kingdom. They also accepted the Catholic Faith. Nzinga a Nkuwu, the supreme king (or *manikongo*), became Catholic and was baptized as Hongo (João) II, in honor of the king of Portugal, King João I.

Kongo thus became a Christian kingdom, and in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Henrique, the grandson of the Manikongo Hongo II, became the first black African bishop in the Catholic Church. The nobles followed their king's lead and accepted the Faith. Many of the Bakongo people also were baptized, and a flourishing church seemed to be growing in the Congo River basin. Portuguese missionaries and Congolese converts set out into the interior of Kongo to preach the Gospel among the people there.

But Portuguese greed for gold and slaves worked steadily against the efforts of the Portuguese government and the Catholic bishops to make Kongo into a Christian kingdom. Throughout the 1500s, the slave trade grew, and local African warlords and magistrates sold their people as slaves or made war on their neighbors to collect enough slaves for sale.

Seeing the bad effects of slaving on his people, the *manikongo* tried to limit the effects of the slave trade on his subjects. But he lost control of his provinces and local governments, and slave traders were draining the Kongo of its manpower. In letters to the king of Portugal, the *manikongo* complained that the Portuguese had broken their word to his people. Committed as they were to the common good, Africans could not understand this disregard of honor.

After two centuries of Portuguese influence, Kongo was a Europeanized African kingdom; but the *manikongo* had little or no control over his provinces. Kongo's traditional morality was badly damaged, and its new Christian Faith had been distorted.

The desperate *manikongo* at last decided to drive the greedy and treacherous Portuguese slave traders and mercenary soldiers from his land. The king tried to gather the Kongo army from all the provinces, but fewer than half of the army answered the call. In 1665, in the Battle of Mbwila, the Portuguese defeated the Kongolese and the head of the *manikongo* was cut off. It was displayed in the chapel on the bay of Luanda, where the explorer Diego Cão had first landed in Kongo.

## A Warrior Queen

In the 1620s, Dona Anna de Souza Nzinga became a brilliant, warrior queen in the Kongo. She was the daughter of the king of Ndongo, a kingdom subject to Kongo. When Dona Anna's brother murdered her son, the heir to the throne, and made himself king, she fled to the bush and hid. When her brother found that he could not deal with the Portuguese, he called her back and made her his deputy to negotiate with the Europeans. Because of her efforts, the Portuguese made a peace treaty with Ndongo. At this time, Dona Anna accepted baptism.

Later, when the Portuguese betrayed their treaty with Ndongo, Dona Anna found allies among the Jaga, a fierce and less civilized people, and killed her brother to avenge her son. She raised a huge army of followers -- her Jaga allies, her own countrymen, and hundreds of escaped slaves and displaced people.

Dona Anna kept a traditional-style royal court that moved with her and her army from camp to camp. Against African custom, she dressed like a man. Though through all these years she kept a priest at her side and heard Mass daily, her actions were in conflict with her faith. For nine years she fought the Portuguese until she was finally defeated in 1656. She remained queen of Ndongo until her death in 1663. Her sister, Dona Barbara, became queen after Dona Anna's death and made peace with the Europeans.

## The Age of Colonialism

As we have seen, the slave trade disrupted traditional African societies with their family-centered spirit of cooperation. This left the continent open to conquest by the European powers in the 19th century. European **colonialism** was the result.

By the end of the 19th century, almost all of the African continent was divided up into colonies controlled by one or other of the European powers. European governments and companies seized the wealth of African lands and often oppressed the people, but they brought stability, peace, and a degree of civilization to Africa as well. The many different nations of Africa did not become independent until after the Second World War. Traditional African social structures and royal lines, however, no longer exist.

**colonialism:** the control of a region by a more powerful foreign nation

## Africa and the World

The large numbers of slave workers who came from Africa to the Americas greatly affected life in the New World. Portuguese Brazil, along with islands in the Caribbean settled by the French, Spanish, and British, have large African populations and are

extensions of African culture in the New World. African immigrants have influenced life in the United States more than the Native Americans have. Elements of African culture can be seen throughout Spanish America as well. African **social mores** and African religion have continued in Afro-American communities throughout the New World.

**social mores:** the customs or practices of a society

But African culture has not spread only in the Americas. European society both in the Americas and Europe has taken on characteristics of African musical forms and dance, as well African designs and images. For instance, early 20<sup>th</sup> century

European artists imitated West African sculptures and paintings of the human form. Popular music in the United States, Europe, and in much of the world is now a blend of European melodies and African rhythms and harmonies. Bright colors in geometric patterns are so familiar in the decorative arts that it almost forgotten that they came from Africa.

Africa's influence on art and music has been very important to the development of the culture of the world in which we live. African culture has truly become a world culture.

## CHAPTER REVIEW

### Summary

- ♦ Africa is said to be the first home of the human race. It is the second largest continent. Africa can be divided into six areas: North Africa, the Sahara, West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, and South Africa.
- ♦ The peoples who settled in Africa were the Afro-Asians, whose descendants live in North Africa; the Bantu, the tall, black people who inhabit the central plateau; the Pygmies of the Congo basin, who were short in stature; and the Bushmen, who live on the fringes of the Kalahari Desert.
- ♦ The early peoples of Africa lived in the Sahara region, before the lush grasslands dried up between 3000–2500 B.C. The Saharan people dispersed towards the Mediterranean, towards the Nile and towards the south, pushing the Bushmen farther and farther south.
- ♦ The high civilization of Egypt arose in the Nile River valley around 4000 B.C. Two other kingdoms existed on the Nile River: Kush (750 B.C.–A.D. 300), with its capital city in Meroe, and Axum or Nubia (A.D. 300–1400). Kush faded mysteriously and no one knows how the end came. Axum or Nubia arose in the mountains of Ethiopia. The kingdom of Nubia became Christian in the 500s, but was cut off from the rest of the Christian world by the Muslim conquest of North Africa in the 600s.
- ♦ The Arabs established their empire in North Africa beginning with the conquest of Egypt in 639. All of North Africa became Muslim, and the Berbers there carried Islam to the Sudanic kingdoms.

- ♦ Arabs south of the Sahara developed the Sudanic civilization in the west of Africa. The four kingdoms of Sudan were Ghana (A.D. 700–1200), Mali (1200–1500), Songhai (1350–1600), and Kanem-Bornu (800–1800).
- ♦ The Sudanic kingdoms were ruled by tribal kings with absolute power. The wealth and power of these kingdoms came from the sale of slaves and gold. Along with Arab traders, who bartered salt for gold, came Muslim teachers who converted the Sudanic peoples to Islam. Sudanic capitals became centers of Islamic learning. By the 1600s, the kingdoms of West Africa traded with the Europeans and sent slaves to the Americas.
- ♦ Two regions were hit hard by the slave trade: West Africa, resulting in the weakening of communal ties; and Central and East Africa, where depopulation was so severe that villages starved from lack of labor. Those who became slaves were betrayed by rival tribes or sold by their chiefs.
- ♦ In 1482 Diego Cão made contact with the kingdom of Kongo. The king or *manikongo* converted, and Kongo became a Christian kingdom. The *manikongo's* grandson Henrique became the first black African bishop in the Catholic Church. The scandal of Portuguese greed and the slave trade weakened Christianity in the Kongo. Efforts to expel the Portuguese were defeated. During this period the Kongo had an unusual warrior queen, Donna Anna de Souza Nzinga, who was a baptized Christian but lived as a pagan king of the past.

## Key Concepts

**Afro-Asian:** the name for the ancestors of the people who live in northern Africa. They had light brown skin and were of medium height. Afro-Asians have been called “Caucasoid” or “Hamitic.”

**Bantu:** the name for the peoples who have lived in the sub-Saharan plateau and along the fringe of the forest region. They are tall, large framed, dark ebony in skin color, and have wiry, tightly curled black hair.

**Bushmen:** the name for the peoples who have made their homes in Africa’s eastern and southern savannas. They are slight of build, of medium height, and have light, copper-colored skin. Their eyes are almond-shaped, like the eyes of East Asian peoples, and they have tightly curled dark hair. The Bushmen are a nomadic people, living by hunting and gathering only. Farming is still not their ordinary practice. Their paintings on the rock faces of cliffs and outcroppings of stone are very like the prehistoric paintings in the caves of Europe.

**literary language:** a form of a language that is more elegant than everyday speech

**Sudanic civilization:** the civilization of the Bantu peoples who lived in the region south of the Sahara Desert

**colonialism:** the control of a region by a more powerful foreign nation

## Dates to Remember

### B.C.

**3000** the Sahara grasslands dry up.

**-2500**

**ca. 750** the princes of Kush establish their capital at Napata.

### A.D.

**300s** Christian missionaries reach Axum.

**-400s**

**500s** the Church in Nubia becomes Monophysite.

**900s** Ghana begins to expand its power.

**1235** Mali conquers what remained of Ghana.

**1276** Muslims begin their conquests of the Nubian kingdoms.

**ca. 1350** establishment of the kingdom of Kongo

**1482** Diego Cão makes the first European contact with Kongo.

**1591** Morocco brings an end to the Songhai kingdom.

**ca. 1600** slave trade with the Europeans begins.

## Central Characters

**Menelik (ca. 950 B.C.):** the legendary son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

**St. Frumentius (4<sup>th</sup> century):** the first Christian missionary to reach Axum

**Prester John:** a legendary Christian king believed in the Middle Ages to live in Africa

**Sonni Ali (r. 1464-1492):** pagan king of Songhai who championed his people's religion against the Muslim faith of the Mali kings

**Muhammad Askia (r. 1493-1528):** Muslim king of Songhai who seized power after the death of Sonni Ali

**Diego Cão (flourished 1480-1486):** a Portuguese explorer and the first European to make contact with the kingdom of Kongo

**Nzinga a Nkuwu, or Hongo (João) II (1470-1506):** the supreme king (or *manikongo*) of Kongo, who became Catholic

**Dona Anna de Souza Nzinga (1581-1663):** a queen of Ndongo (a kingdom subject to Kongo) who fought the Portuguese

## Questions for Review

1. Into what six regions can Africa be divided?
2. List the major rivers of Africa.
3. Name the four populations that make up Africa.
4. How does the drying up of the Sahara explain the history of Africa?
5. Who brought the Christian Faith to Axum? To what heresy did Axum convert? What did this heresy teach?

6. What role did the king play in Sudanic civilization?
7. When and through whom did Sudanic civilization adopt a written literature? In what language was this literature written?
8. How did the Sudanic peoples become Muslim?
9. How did the slave trade develop in West Africa?
10. Why was it difficult for the Catholic bishops of Kongo to make Kongo a Christian kingdom?

## Ideas in Action

1. Look up in the encyclopedia, or on the Internet, the kingdoms of the Sudan --- Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu. What were their cities? How did the people in these kingdoms live? Why did the kingdoms not continue into our times?
2. Look up Timbuktu. How old is that city? What is its importance? How was it looked upon by Europe?
3. Research the history of Christianity in Africa in a good history of Africa or the encyclopedia. Which Christian groups sent missionaries to Africa? Who was David Livingstone (Protestant missionary)? Who were the first Catholic missionaries to evangelize Africa?
4. Make a list of African (as well as African-American) saints. Say a litany of the saints, naming the Africans. Find others besides St. Josephine Bakhita (February 8), St. Charles Lwanga and companions (June 3), Blessed Isidore Bakanja (August 8), Blessed Ghebere Mikha'el (September 2), St. Martin de Porres (November 3), St. Lalibala (Ghebere Misquel, Ethiopian emperor --- October 27), Bl. Absalom Jones (an American, the first black American to receive ordination), and Pierre Toussaint (a 19<sup>th</sup> century American).
5. Writing Activity: Imagine you are a travel agent and you are creating an historic tour of Africa. Write a two-page "tour brochure" about historic places the tourists will visit.

## Highways and Byways

### The Legend of Prester John

During the late Middle Ages in Europe, a legend grew up of a great Christian kingdom in Africa on the other side of Muslim-controlled lands. A semi-magical king named Prester John, who, it seems, could live forever, ruled this mythical kingdom. Prester John, it was said, was waging war against the Muslims until the Christian crusaders of the West could join forces with him. Then, together, they could eliminate the Muslim threat.

In the 1400s, Portuguese explorers ventured into the mountains of East Africa in search of Prester John. They did not find the fabled king but discovered an Ethiopia that

was in many ways like the kingdoms of medieval Europe! The Portuguese found proud and independent nobles, bound by oaths of loyalty to their king, along with lesser nobles and lords below them, and landless peasants laboring for all. Ethiopia had monks, abbots, and bishops with their parish clergy worshiping as Christians, but in strange and mysterious liturgies and in an ancient, sacred language.