**All About Africa**

You cannot understand the real history of a people until you the understand the geography of the area in which they live. The geography has direct impact on their survival and well-being or it can be a barrier to future success.

* Africa is the world’s second-largest and second-most populous continent. Name is derived from the Latin *aprica* (sonny) and the Greek *aphrike* (without cold, land of the big waves). At about 11.7 million square miles of territory, it covers 6% of the Earth’s total surface area and 20.4% of the total land area. With 1 billion people, it accounts for 15% of the world’s human population.
* Largest country in land mass was the Sudan, but South Sudan declared its independence in June, 2011 and now it is virtually a tie between Algeria and the Congo at 2.3 million square miles. The smallest is the Seychelles at 455 sq km.
* The largest in population is Nigeria with 155 million people and the smallest is the Seychelles at 89,000 inhabitants.
* The Great Rift Valley- a long string of volcanic peaks, mile high waterfalls starting in the south at Tanzania and stretching north to Ethiopia. The largest scar on the face of the earth. Average elevation on continent is 2,000 ft. Africa has 16,000 miles of coastline.
* Major Rivers – Nile (4,184 miles long), Congo (2922), Niger (2600), Zambezi (1600).
* Major Lakes – Victoria (2nd to Superior), Tanganyika, Albert, Chad.
* Highest point of elevation is Mt. Kilimanjaro (19,340 ft.) in Tanzania and the lowest is Lake Asal in Djibouti at 502 ft. below sea level.
* Major Mountains – Kilimanjaro, Atlas, Kenya, Drakensburg
* Hump of Africa is in the West and the Horn of Africa is in the East. Entire continent is plateau with deserts and mountains in north and south, high rocky coastline and tilted from West to East. (Nile flows north into Mediterranean Sea). Africa is 5,000 from north to south and almost 5,000 miles from east to west.
* Major Deserts – Sahara, Namib, Kalahari.
* Sahara Desert- name derived from Arabic *sarai* meaning desert. The world’s largest hot desert at 3.6 million square miles stretching more than 3,000 miles from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean and covers nearly a third of the continent. Southern border is the Sahel, a semi-arid steppe zone leading to the savanna. Hottest continent on planet with highest recorded temperature at 136 degrees in Libya in 1922. Continental United States can fit into Sahara.
* Climate – The climate of Africa ranges from tropical to subarctic on its highest peaks. Its northern half is primarily desert or arid, while its central and southern areas contain both savanna plains and very dense jungle (rainforest) regions. In between, there is a convergence where vegetation patterns such as Sahel and steppe dominate.
* Political Institutions – Power to govern a state usually resided in a given family and was transmitted by it. Two families were important in choosing a royal family future ruler. The electing family could exercise a choice within the royal family. They wanted stabilizing effect on royal family, but they might not select eldest son if they felt that he was not the best choice.
* Enthroning family- new king could not exercise any authority until he had been vested by the enthroning family; this ensured the people of a satisfactory leader. King’s authority was curbed if he did not belong to the family of the first person occupying the ground in his kingdom, he had no rights over the land
* There was a strong attachment on the part of the individual to local authority and local loyalties. Each locality had its own king.
* Economic Life – Land belonged to the community as a whole, not by an individual. Most important local dignitary was the master of the ground, who was also the grand priest and administrator of the soil. Individual persons could get permission to use the land, but it to the community.
* Social Organization – Family was the basis of social organization. Eldest male was head of the family, but relationships were traced through the mother’s lineage.
* In West Africa, children were prized. A women’s fertility was valued. Art and music reflected a strong appreciation for children. The birth of a child was always celebrated with feasting, dancing, and singing. Wealth was measured in terms of how large a family was. Children belonged solely to the mother and the eldest brother had all parental rights & responsibilities.
* West Africans lived in large family groups. Marriages were arranged by the families. The husband’s family paid a “bride price.” Everyone living in the village was expected to help everyone else. In each compound, the children called all old women “grandmother” and all old men “grandfather”. They all call each other brother and sister. Children who lost parents were raised by relatives.
* Villages were made of clans. Clans were headed by the eldest male member. Many clans had certain occupations that were passed along from generation to generation. Boys learned the same trade as their fathers and uncles, and they had to learn the secret rituals of songs and dances that each trade had. Some clans specialized in metalwork, others hunting, fishing, griots, and still others provided kings and leaders of the province. Girls learned how to run a home.
* Traditional African law made a family or clan accountable for any crimes committed by individual members. West Africans used good deeds and gifts, rather than physical punishment, to settle disputes. For a victim’s family, this penalty helped them meet their survival needs if they lost the head of the family.
* The earliest West Africans believed in a powerful “creator god” who made the world but did not interfere in people’s lives. They also believed in spirits that controlled nature and did interfere in daily life. People prayed or made offerings to these spirits to keep them happy.
* The West Africans believed their dead relatives could talk to these spirits in the spirit world, so they had to keep their relatives happy, too. They believed that spirits could be found in rocks, trees, the air, land and all around.
* Even when family members family members died, West Africans believed their spirits lived on. Figurines buried in graves linked the living with the spirit of the person who had died.
* Everyone joined together for weddings, funerals and rituals held at special times, such as harvest time. Some of these festivals lasted for days, with lots of singing, dancing, eating and drinking.
* The funeral of a relative was a sacred ritual and an obligation of the family. The body could lie in state for weeks until everyone had a chance to pay respect to the family and mourn.
* Africa called dark continent because of geography and inability of outsiders to reach West Africa.
* Prehistory – Africa is considered by most paleoanthropologists to be the oldest inhabited territory on earth. After the Ice Ages the Sahara was a green fertile valley. About 7000 years ago the climate in the Sahara began to change and the region was becoming increasingly dry and hostile. The population began to trek out of the area as the desert began to reclaim the land (today at 20 miles a year).
* West African Empires – Ghana was the first West African of which there was a recorded history. Our knowledge about West Africa’s early history is severely limited by the lack of written records. Griots kept mental records of all memorable events-feasts and ceremonies, royal coronations, births, deaths, marriages, victories and defeats. Griots are revered because they are the keepers of the heritage. Some of their presentations were as long and artful as The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.*
* The earliest written records were provided by the Arabs who developed close contact with West Africa around 800 A.D. Ghana was known as the land of gold and it was used to trade for salt from North Africa through silent trading. The kings of Ghana controlled the trade and were extremely wealthy because of it. The kings charged one dinar of gold for every donkey that brought salt into the empire and two dinars of gold for every donkey that left with gold. The same tax was used for cooper and other products that came into the capital of Kumbi Saleh.
* Through the mastery of ironworking, West Africans, and more specifically Ghanaians, were able to craft better tools, helping their farmers to be more productive. Iron also provided stronger weapons, which gave their warriors an advantage over those who fought with wood, bone or stone armaments. Blacksmiths were highly revered and sometimes feared in Ghana because they were believed to be powerful magicians. Blacksmiths took ore, which came from the earth, and through fire, an element associated with magic, shaped it into powerful tools people could use. The West African blacksmiths had a closed and secret society, through which their skills were passed from one generation to the next.
* Ghana was already a powerful empire, with a highly complex political and social organization, when the Arabs reached it about 800 A.D. An Arabic map of 830 A.D. has Ghana marked on it and refers to it as the land of gold. A thriving trade developed between Ghana and the world of Islam. Al-Bakri, a contemporary Arab writer, was impressed with the display of power and affluence of the Ghanaian king. According to him, the king had an army of two hundred thousand warriors which included about 40,000 men with bows and arrows.
* Al-Bakri also described an official audience at the royal palace in which the king, , the Ghana, was surrounded by lavish trappings of gold and silver and was attended by many pages, servants, large numbers of faithful officials, provincial rulers, and mayors of cities. On such occasions, the king heard the grievances of his people, his ruling was final.
* The power of the king was based on his ability to maintain law and order in his kingdom. This was necessary to control and protect the gold trade. After the 11th century the Ghanaian empire was continually exposed to harassment from a long series of Arabic holy wars. Over a long period of time, the power of the king was reduced, because the gold trade was interrupted, until the empire of Ghana finally collapsed to Arab invaders from the North.
* Mali- the princes of Mali were vassals of Ghana. They threw off the rule of Ghana’s king in 1230 A.D. The princes invaded and they crushed Kumbi Saleh; Ghana and its gold mines were absorbed into Mali.
* Sundiata Kieta was appointed by his father to rule, but could not walk. He was exiled by his brother. He returned and took control and defeated the existing king. He was known as the Lion King. He expanded the salt and gold trade and stabilized the empire under Islam. Sundiata died in 1255.
* Mansa Musa consolidated the power of Mali and expanded the boundaries of the empire nearly to the Atlantic Ocean and controlled an area larger than Europe. Established the major city of Timbuktu. Ibn Batuta, An Arab traveler, visited Timbuktu and wrote about the wealth f the city, its educated citizens and the University of Sankore. The city was known as the “Paris of Africa”.
* The university had the largest known collection of books at that time. People throughout Europe came to study and learn new techniques in eye surgery. The city gained wealth through books.
* Mansa Musa and his entire ruling class of Mali converted to Islam. He made a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. He took 60,000 people, 500 personal servants each carrying a gold staff weighting 6 pounds each and 80 camels loaded with 20 tons of gold to give to the poor. It took him 8 months to reach Cairo. He continued to Mecca giving away so much gold that its value went down for 10 years. He brought back people to build his city. Alerted Europe to Africa’s wealth.
* Mansa Musa died in 1332 and his son took over and he was a weak leader. The empire was so large that and overextended that provinces began to break away. Mali lost control of the trans-Saharan trade and by 1500 Mali had lost its importance.
* Songhai won its independence from Mali as early as 1375. Sunni Ali began his 28 year rule in 1464. Sunni Ali was a military leader. He led the expansion of the Songhai Empire. Sunni Ali respected the beliefs of the Muslims with which he traded, but he did not forget the traditional ways, because he knew that the farmers and fishermen who would be in his army still maintained their traditional beliefs. Ali died in 1492 and his son, Sunni Baru, took over. He was not a strict Muslim.
* Askia Muhammed began his 36 year reign in 1493. He killed Sunni Baru and took control. Forced royal princes to marry him and become a part of the royal family. He took a pilgrimage to Mecca with 1500 people. Codified the law, appointed regional governors. Had 99 sons, deposed by them and exiled by them. In fighting and Arabs capture of Timbuktu led to collapse of kingdom.