

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



Kingdoms and States of Medieval Africa, 500–1500

Lesson 1 African Society and Culture

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does geography affect society, culture, and trade?

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

so-called commonly named; popularly termed

founding originating; beginning

Content Vocabulary

plateau a relatively high, flat land area

savanna broad grassland dotted with small trees and shrubs

lineage group an extended family unit that has combined into a larger community

matrilineal tracing lineage through the mother rather than the father

patrilineal tracing the lineage through the father

diviner a person who is believed to have the power to foretell events

griot a special class of African storytellers who help keep alive a people's history

TAKING NOTES: *Identifying Cause and Effect*

ACTIVITY As you read, use a table like the one below to identify the four different climate zones of Africa, what percentage of Africa each zone covers, and how the climate has affected farming.

Climate Zone:		
Percentage of Africa:		
Farming		

Reading Essentials and Study Guide

The logo for 'networks' features the word in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a stylized graphic of a network or starburst, consisting of several thin lines radiating from a central point, with a small circle at the center.

Kingdoms and States of Medieval Africa, 500–1500

Lesson 1 African Society and Culture, *continued*

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Earth's second-largest continent, Africa, includes a great variety of landforms, or types of land and geography. African societies were based on extended family units. Most people lived in rural villages. Africa's rich culture was passed from one generation to the next through music and storytelling.

The Impact of Geography

Guiding Question *How have Africa's landforms and climate zones influenced its farming and herding?*

After Asia, Africa is Earth's largest continent. It stretches nearly 5,000 miles (around 8,000 km) from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the Cape of Good Hope in the south. Africa is almost completely surrounded by two oceans and two seas.

Africa is as diverse as it is large. The continent includes several different geographic zones. Africa's coast along the Mediterranean Sea is mostly mountainous. South of the mountains lies Earth's largest desert, the Sahara. This desert stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean. The Nile River is to the east. Beyond that the Red Sea separates Africa from Asia.

Africa south of the Sahara is divided into several major regions. The **so-called** hump of Africa, in the west, juts into the Atlantic Ocean. Here the Sahara desert gradually turns into to grasslands in the interior (the part of a country far from the coast). There are tropical jungles along the coast.

Far to the east is a very different terrain. Snow-capped mountains, **plateaus** (high, flat areas), and lakes are in this region. A distinctive feature is the Great Rift Valley. There mountains rise over deep canyons. Much of this region is grassland where wild animals live. Farther south lies the Congo basin. The Congo River provides water to the dense vegetation. The tropical rain forests of this area gradually are replaced by the hills, plateaus, and deserts of the south.

Africa includes four distinct climate zones. A mild climate zone stretches across the northern coast and southern tip of Africa. These areas have moderate rainfall, warm temperatures, and fertile land. Farms there produce large amounts of crops that can support large populations.

Deserts form another climate zone. They cover about 40 percent of Africa. The Sahara in the north and the Kalahari in the south are the two largest deserts. A third climate zone is the rain forest that stretches along the Equator and makes up about 10 percent of the continent. There heavy rains and warm temperatures produce dense forests where little farming or travel is possible. **Savannas**, broad grasslands with small trees and bushes, exist both north and south of the rain forest. They cover perhaps 40 percent of Africa's land area. The savannas get enough rainfall for farming and herding, but the rain does not always occur at regular times.

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



Kingdoms and States of Medieval Africa, 500–1500

Lesson 1 African Society and Culture, *continued*



Reading Progress Check

Identifying What are Africa's four climate zones?

African Society

Guiding Question *How did values and customs help shape societies in medieval Africa?*

Early African societies, including those of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, had many characteristics in common. African towns often began as fortified villages. They slowly grew into larger communities. They were government and trade centers, with markets filled with goods from faraway regions.

African towns were home to artisans of metalwork, woodwork, pottery, and other crafts, as well as to farmers.

Most African societies did not have written languages. As a result, much of our knowledge of them comes from descriptions recorded by foreign visitors, such as the Arab traveler Ibn Battuta. These reports contained a great deal of information. However, they were skewed (or influenced in a certain direction) by the visitors' outside perspectives. Also, visitors usually came into contact only with the wealthy and the powerful people. Their accounts tell little about ordinary people's lives.

Family and Lineage

Most Africans lived in small rural villages. People were identified by their extended family and a lineage group. At the basic level was the extended family. It was made up of parents, children, grandparents, and other family dependents. They lived in small, round dwellings, or buildings, made of packed mud with a roof made of plant material like straw. These family units were in turn combined into larger communities. These larger communities were known as **lineage groups**.

Lineage groups were the basic building blocks of African society. All members of a lineage group could claim to be descended from a real or legendary common ancestor. As in China, the elders—leading members of the lineage group—had a great deal of power over the others in the group. A lineage group provided support for all its members. Members of extended families and lineage groups were expected to take care of one another.

Women were usually subordinate to men. In some cases, they were valued for their work and for having children and increasing the size of the lineage group. Women often worked in the fields while men tended cattle or hunted. In some communities, women were merchants.

In many African societies, a family's lineage was based on the mother rather than the father. In other words, these were **matrilineal** societies (societies in which family is traced through the mother), rather than **patrilineal** societies (societies in which family is traced through the father). Women were often permitted to inherit property. In these societies, husbands were often expected to move into wives' houses.

Reading Essentials and Study Guide

networks

Kingdoms and States of Medieval Africa, 500–1500

Lesson 1 African Society and Culture, *continued*

Education

In a typical African village, a process existed for educating young people to become part of the community. By the 1400s, both boys and girls in the Congo were raised by their mothers until the age of six. They learned language, family history, and songs that gave meaning to their lives. At age six, girls went to the “house of the women,” and boys went to the “house of the men.”

Fathers then took over their sons’ education. Boys learned to hunt and fish, to grow plants, and to clear fields for planting. Young men learned to live and survive in the natural world.

Girls continued to learn what they needed from their mothers. They were taught how to take care of the home and work in the fields. Girls also learned to be good wives and mothers. When they married and became mothers, they would become part of the community of women.

Finally, young people reached an age when they were expected to enter the community. This transition occurred at the time of puberty. It was marked by an initiation ceremony. The young people were first isolated from the community. They then underwent a ritual ceremony. In this ceremony they symbolically died and were reborn. Young girls became women, and young boys became men. Both groups then entered completely into adult community life.

Slavery

Europeans did not introduce slavery to Africa. In fact, it had been practiced in Africa since ancient times. Slavery was not unique to Africa, however. It was common throughout the world.

North African Berber groups may have raided villages south of the Sahara for captives. The captives were then taken north and sold throughout the Mediterranean region. The sale and use of captives for forced labor was also common in African societies farther south and along the east coast of Africa.

Slaves included people captured in war, debtors, and some criminals. They were not necessarily seen as inferior but as trusted servants. Some were even respected for their special talents.



Reading Progress Check

Summarizing What was the role of lineage groups in African society?

Religious Beliefs

Guiding Question *What part did religious beliefs play in medieval African societies?*

Early African religious beliefs varied from place to place. Most African societies shared some common religious ideas. One shared belief was in a single creator god. Some Yoruba peoples in Nigeria believed that their chief god sent his son Oduduwa down from heaven in a canoe to create the first humans. Sometimes, the creator god was joined by a group of lesser gods. The Ashanti people of Ghana believed in the supreme being Nyame. His sons were lesser gods. Ashanti gods could not always be trusted, so humans needed to appease, or calm, them to avoid their anger. Some peoples believed

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



Kingdoms and States of Medieval Africa, 500–1500

Lesson 1 African Society and Culture, *continued*

that the creator god had once lived on Earth, but that god had left in disgust at human behavior. However, the god was also merciful and could be calmed down by good behavior.

Ritual was a way to communicate with the gods. It was usually carried out by a special group of **diviners**. Diviners were believed to have the power to predict events, usually by working with supernatural forces. The king employed many diviners to guarantee, or ensure, a bountiful harvest and protect his interests and those of his subjects.

The importance of ancestors was another key element in African religion. Each lineage group could trace itself back to a **founding**, or original, ancestor or a group of ancestors. Ritual ceremonies were dedicated to ancestors. These ancestors were believed to be closer to the gods. They had the power to influence the lives of their descendants.

African religious beliefs were challenged, but not always replaced, by the arrival of Islam. Islam swept across northern Africa after the Arab conquest. Islam was slower to spread through the lands south of the Sahara. The process likely began as a result of trade. Merchants introduced Muslim beliefs to the trading states of Mali, Ghana, and Songhai. At first, conversion took place on an individual basis. The first rulers to convert were the royal family of Gao at the end of the tenth century. By the end of the 1400s, much of the population south of the Sahara had accepted Islam.

The process was even more gradual in East Africa. Islam was first brought to East Africa by Muslim traders from Arabia. However, it did not gain many converts there until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Islam had even less success in areas of Ethiopia. Judaism had been adopted by the kingdom of Semien in the fourth century. Christianity had been adopted by the rulers of the eastern state of Axum at the beginning of the fourth century. The Jewish kingdom of Semien was small but strong. It lasted until the early 1600s. The Christian kingdoms of Ethiopia were also strong. However, beginning in the 1300s their independence was threatened. Wars with neighboring Muslim states slowly broke down Christian control over Ethiopia. This caused Ethiopia to ask for help from Christian Europe and the Portuguese Empire beginning in the late 1400s.



Reading Progress Check

Identifying What role did ancestors play in African religion?

Connections to TODAY

Griots and Oral Traditions

The tradition of the griot continues to be a vital part of West African culture. In countries such as Gambia and Senegal, these storytellers still act as oral historians and genealogists. Today's griots are also popular entertainers who put on shows, appear on television, and record CDs. Modern griots often mix traditional stories and modern commentary.

Reading Essentials and Study Guide

networks

Kingdoms and States of Medieval Africa, 500–1500

Lesson 1 African Society and Culture, *continued*

African Culture

Guiding Questions *How did values and customs help shape societies in medieval Africa? What part did religious beliefs play in medieval African societies?*

In early Africa, including the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, the arts were a way of serving religion. A work of art—including sculpture, literature, or music—was created to express religious beliefs. For example, wood-carvers throughout Africa made remarkable masks and statues. The carvings often represented gods, spirits, or ancestral figures. The artworks were believed to embody, or represent, the spiritual powers of their subjects.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, metalworkers made beautiful bronze and iron statues at Ife (EE•feh). Ife, in what is now Nigeria, was the capital of the Yoruba people. The Ife sculptures may have influenced artists in Benin in West Africa. They produced equally impressive works in bronze during the same period. The Benin sculptures include bronze heads. Many were heads of kings and figures of various types of animals.

Like wood carving and sculpture, African music and dance often served a religious purpose. African dance was a way to communicate with the spirits. It was “the great popular art of the African people.” African music’s strong rhythmic beat influenced modern Western music.

African music also had a social purpose. Most African people had no written language. So the words to songs passed on stories and religious traditions from generation to generation. Storytelling, usually by priests or a special class of storytellers known as **griots** (GREE•OHZ), served the same purpose. Storytellers were historians who kept alive a people’s history. For example, the story of the first Mali king, Sundiata, was passed down by griots.



Reading Progress Check

Determining Importance Why was music and storytelling important in African societies?
