

CHAPTER
8

CHAPTERS IN BRIEF *African Civilizations,*
1500 B.C.—A.D. 700

Summary

CHAPTER OVERVIEW *African peoples develop different ways of adapting to the continent's many environments. Yet, African cultures share many characteristics. Africa's earliest known culture develops in West Africa. Bantu-speaking people begin south of the Sahara Desert. Over the centuries they move until they fill the southern half of Africa. In East Africa, the kingdom of Aksum rises and flourishes.*

1 Diverse Societies in Africa

KEY IDEA *African peoples developed many different ways of life as they adapted to many different environments.*

Africa is the second largest continent in the world. It reaches 4,600 miles from east to west and 5,000 miles from north to south. It has about one-fifth of the earth's land. Much of the land is a high plateau, with lower land near the coasts. The rivers that flow along this high land often form waterfalls or rapids. As a result, boats cannot use these rivers to travel either to or from the coast. Also, the coast is not good for boats. It has relatively few harbors for so large a landmass.

Africa has many different environments. The Equator crosses Africa and much of the continent lies in the tropics, where the weather is hot all year round. Even in this area, though, the environments are widely different. There are hot, dry deserts; steamy, wet rain forests; and high, cool mountains.

About a third of Africa's land is desert. This harsh land holds few people. It also forms a barrier to people who want to move from one area to another. The Sahara Desert in the north of Africa is about one-third the size of the United States. Dense rainforests cover much of the central part of Africa. This area receives heavy rainfall. Trees grow to towering heights and block sunlight from the forest floor. As a result, few small plants grow underneath the tall trees.

The northern and southern regions of Africa have large numbers of people. They have good soil for farming and plenty of grass for animals to eat. They have pleasant climates. Most Africans live on the grasslands that cover almost half of the continent. They grow grains, including rice and wheat, and tend to cattle. Each year, though, the Sahara Desert expands and takes away a bit more of this grassland.

The first humans in Africa got food by hunting animals and gathering plants. Even today, some

African peoples still use this method for obtaining food. Men hunt animals with spears or bows and arrows. Women and children gather roots and berries.

Over time, these people learned to tame animals and raise them for food. These ancient herders kept cattle, goats, or sheep. Like the hunters and gatherers, these herders were nomadic people. As they moved, they looked for plentiful grass and for water for their animals. When food or water was used up in one area, they moved to another.

About 10,000 B.C., some people in Africa began to farm—growing their own food instead of gathering wild food. Later the climate changed, bringing more rainfall to the Sahara. People farmed there until the climate changed once again around 4000 B.C. and the desert returned. The people then left the desert and headed for many different areas. They went to farm in the Nile Valley and West Africa or on the grasslands. Some moved to the rain forest.

The grasslands had good soil, and the people could grow extra food. As in other areas, farming led to changes in African society. With more food, people lived longer and the population grew. Some people were able to specialize in tasks beyond raising food, such as making jewelry or pottery. Others became leaders. They organized the group's efforts to grow food, defend against invaders, or plan for the future.

African peoples had many differences because of the different environments in which they lived. The people who lived south of the Sahara, though, had these features in common:

- The family was the most important unit of society. In some groups, family was considered all people who come from common ancestors. This is called a clan.
- They believed that one god created the world. Also, they felt that plants, animals, and other

natural forces all have spirits that play an important role in life.

- They relied on oral storytelling, rather than writing, to pass on the traditions of their people.

The Nok culture, of West Africa, existed from about 500 B.C. to A.D. 200. The Nok people are known for their interesting pottery figures and for being the first people in Africa who knew how to make iron. Some styles of Nok pottery are still found in Africa today.

By looking for signs of the past, archaeologists found an ancient city in West Africa. Djenné-Djeno is the oldest known African city south of the Sahara. The city rested on the banks of the Niger River. Researchers have found thousands of objects such as pottery, toys, jewelry, and knives. The oldest pieces are from 250 B.C.

The city held about 50,000 people at its largest. At first, they lived in round huts made of reeds and covered with mud. Later they lived in houses of mud bricks. They grew rice, raised cattle, and made iron. They traded these goods for gold and copper.

🕒 Migration Case Study: Bantu-Speaking Peoples

KEY IDEA Throughout history, various peoples have desired to leave their homes and move to a new land.

Throughout human history, many peoples have felt the urge to move from their homes to a new land. While there are many reasons that people make such a move, they can be grouped into three main causes:

1. *Environmental.* The climate of an area may change or its soil may become too poor for farming or all the water may be used up. Then, people move to a new area.
2. *Economic.* There are too many people in an area or too little food or too few jobs. Then, some people will move to another place to find the land, food, or jobs they need.
3. *Political.* Sometimes one group of people treats a different group harshly. They may capture their land and turn them into slaves. The people made to suffer in this way may end up moving to a new land. They may go by force—as when they are made slaves—or by choice—as they hope to escape their suffering.

Any of these factors can push people out of an area. Or they may pull people into an area. These

are called push-pull factors. For example, available jobs will pull people into an area. But too few jobs will push them out.

These reasons have pushed or pulled people to move from the beginning of human life on Earth, and they continue to do so today. The large-scale movement of people in modern times can be traced in written records. In studying times before written history, though, researchers need to look for other clues to these migrations. One clue they use is language.

People bring their language with them when they move to a new place. Languages do change over time. Suppose that historians find two languages from two distant areas that have words that are somewhat similar. They can conclude that those two languages may have both come from the same original language. They say that the original speakers of the language simply moved to the two different areas long before. Then, the two languages changed independently of one another. This kind of clue has given historians a way of understanding the early history of Africa. Many languages spoken in Africa today developed from the same parent language called Proto-Bantu. The people who spoke Bantu first lived in a part of modern Nigeria. In the first few centuries A.D., they began to move south and east. Over time, they spread throughout Africa south of the Sahara Desert, reaching the southern tip around 500 years ago. They brought their language and their culture with them.

One reason that these people moved had to do with how they farmed. Their method was to clear forest land by burning down trees. This left a plot of rich soil that was suitable for growing food—for a few years. After that, however, the soil no longer could produce good crops. The people then needed to move to a new area to clear a new patch of ground.

Another reason they moved was that their farming was so successful. Farming helped them produce more food than they could by hunting and gathering. With more to eat, groups became larger—and the land more crowded. They could not move north, where the Sahara Desert made a barrier. So they had to move farther and farther south.

As they reached new areas, the Bantu peoples met other peoples. Sometimes these meetings were violent. The Bantus, who knew how to make iron, had better weapons than those they met, who only had stone tools. Some of the peoples that they met

are still found in Africa, but they live in small areas with very harsh environments. The Bantus took the better land.

🕒 The Kingdom of Aksum

KEY IDEA *The kingdom of Aksum in East Africa became an important part of trade between different nations. It also adopted Christianity as its religion.*

The peoples in East Africa had far more contact with people from other areas. The Kushite kingdom of Nubia had close relations with Egypt, and its kings even ruled Egypt for a while. That kingdom continued for many centuries as a trading power. It was then replaced by the kingdom of Aksum in modern Ethiopia.

Aksum may have begun when Arabian traders mixed with the people of Kush about 1000 B.C. Its first mention in written records is in a Greek book from A.D. 100 that talks about the king of Aksum. About that time, the kingdom of Aksum began to grow, taking other lands. Some were in Africa, and some were on the Arabian peninsula.

With this growth, Aksum became an important part of world trade. Salt, emeralds, brass, copper, gold, cloth, olive oil, and wine all moved through Aksum. Its trade routes helped link Rome to India. In the early 300s, Aksum had a strong new king named Ezana. He captured more land on the Arabian peninsula. Then he conquered Kush and destroyed the ancient city of Meroë in 350. The action removed an old rival in trade.

Because it was a trading center, Aksum was home to peoples from many different cultures. At the time of King Ezana, these different peoples all spoke to one another in Greek in order to be understood. The mixing of these different peoples did more than bring a new language to Aksum. It also brought a new religion. During his rule, King Ezana decided to become a Christian. Slowly, the religion spread throughout the land. Even today, about 22 million people in modern Ethiopia are Christian.

The people of Aksum developed a special way of building. They made structures out of stone, not mud baked into bricks by the hot sun. Their kings built tall pillars of stone that reached as high as 60 feet. They were among the tallest structures in the ancient world.

Aksum had other advances as well. Outside of Egypt and Meroë, it was the only culture of ancient Africa to have a written language. The language of

Aksum had been brought to the land by Arab traders many hundreds of years before.

The people of Aksum also developed a new way of farming. They cut wide steps called terraces into the steep mountainsides in their country. The terraces helped the land hold water instead of letting it run down the mountain in a heavy rain. They also used dams and stone tanks to store water and used ditches to channel it to their fields.

Aksum remained an important power in East Africa for 800 years. It was first challenged in the 600s, though, after the new religion of Islam came to Arabia. The followers of Islam captured the lands that Aksum held in the Arabian peninsula. Within a few decades, they had taken much of North Africa, and Aksum remained an island of Christianity in a sea of Islam.

At first, these conquerors left Aksum alone. By 710, however, they had destroyed its chief port on the Red Sea. The Aksum kings moved their capital over the mountains to a hard-to-reach area. Cut off from other Christian lands and from the sea trade, though, Aksum went into decline.

Review

1. **Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects** What impact did geography have on the way human societies developed in Africa?
2. **Determining Main Ideas** What features of culture are common to people south of the Sahara?
3. **Clarifying** Give an example of one of the three reasons that people move from their home to a new land.
4. **Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects** Why did the Bantu peoples move their homes?
5. **Drawing Conclusions** Why was Aksum important?

Answer Key

Chapter 8

SUMMARY

African Civilizations, 1500 B.C.–A.D. 500

Responses will vary but should include points similar to the following:

1. Because of rivers that could not be taken by boats, people in the interior of Africa probably had little contact with those on the coast. The large deserts blocked the movement of people. Deserts and the rain forests were not good places to live. Most people live on the northern and southern coasts, which have good land and good climates, or on the grasslands.
2. The family is the most important unit of society. The people believed that one god created the world but that plants, animals, and other natural forces all have spirits that play an important role in life. They relied on people relating stories orally, rather than in writing, to pass on their traditions.
3. People move from their home to a new land when there are not enough jobs or when food runs out.
4. The Bantu peoples moved because their farming methods used up the soil and they needed to find new land to plant. Also, their farming produced more food, which led to more people, which in turn led to crowding.
5. It was a trading power. It changed to Christianity and was one of only three ancient African lands to have a written language.