

# EARLY AFRICA





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# ■ BEGINNINGS

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Human life began in Africa. What are believed to be the earliest artifacts of man—stone tools, the remains of human skulls—were discovered by British archaeologists Louis Leakey and his wife, Mary, at Olduvai Gorge in East Africa in what is now Tanzania. After years of finding only ancient animal bones, fossils, and prehistoric tools, in 1959, Mary Leakey unearthed a fossilized hominid skull almost two million years old.

It is now known that Africans were the first people to use fire, make tools, render artistic images, and farm. The oldest mathematical object—called the “Ishongo Bone” after the Ishongo peoples of Central Africa (in what is now

the Democratic Republic of Congo)—is an intricately marked bone that may well be the world’s oldest table of prime numbers. It is believed to be somewhere between 6,000 and 9,000 years old.

Not only did human *life* begin in Africa, but the earliest structures of civilization emerged there. Gathering around the three great African river basins—the Nile, the Niger, and the Congo—early humans shifted from living in scant, disparate bands of nomadic tribes to more complex and localized settlements from which cities and empires grew.

The legendary West African city of Timbuktu,



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for example, founded around A.D. 1100, was a city of economic and cultural might—an intellectual, spiritual, and commercial capital—equal to the most historically significant cities in the world: Athens, Rome, Mecca, and Jerusalem.

In 1870, archaeologists uncovered massive elliptical stone walls and other remains of an ancient South African civilization estimated to have existed from A.D. 500 to 1600 in the area of what is now Zimbabwe. (*Zimbabwe* means “stone enclosure.”) Evidence suggests early Zimbabweans smelted gold, carved sculptures, and fashioned pottery. Similar ruins were found in the nearby vicinity of the Limpopo River. As no written records of these cultures exist, the particulars of their decline remain unknown.

In his book, *The World and Africa* (first published in 1947), the late W. E. B. Du Bois, a black Harvard-educated philosopher, historian, and teacher, addressed one of the central ironies of Africa—that the land where language began could not always rely on written records to preserve its story. As Du Bois wrote:

Climate, with sun and ice, gave Europe the opportunity to expand vastly the Asiatic and African invention of written records. Heat and rain made written record in West Africa almost impossible, and forced that land to rely on the memories of men, developed over the centuries to a marvelous system of folklore and tradition.

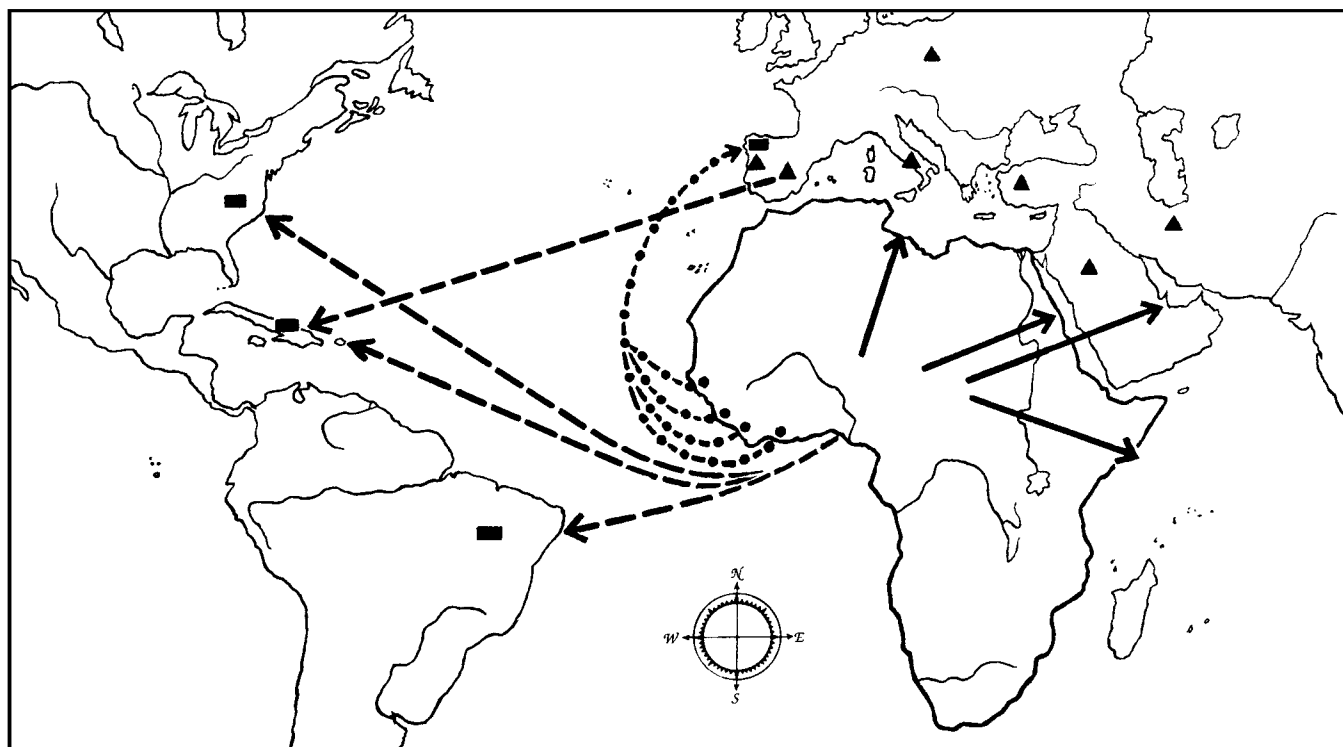
## ■ REVIEW QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Where was the evidence of earliest man found?
2. When did the Ishongo people live?
3. What significant contribution did the Ishongo people make to learning?
4. Where do the descendants of the Ishongo people live today?
5. Why is the city of Timbuktu remembered?
6. What important find was made by archaeologists in 1870?
7. In your own words explain why we know so little of early African history.

# ■ EARLY AFRICAN MIGRATION

Black history began on the continent of Africa. Sometimes by choice, but more often by force, Africans have migrated to every part of the world.



## ■ KEY

- Overland migration
- ▲ Countries reached as a result of overland migration
- - → Overseas migration
- Countries or lands reached as a result of overseas migration
- Predominant slave-exporting bases in west-central Africa

The enslavement of Africans by Europeans began around 1444 when the first Africans were brought to Lisbon, Portugal. Moslem traders sold Africans to Europeans who used them to work the sugar plantations in Spanish and Portuguese colonies.

Moslem traders exported slaves to the coast of the Indian Ocean, to the Middle East, and to North Africa. African slave exports via the Red Sea, trans-Saharan, and East Africa/Indian Ocean to other parts of the world between 1500–1900 totaled at least 5 million.

Between 1450 and 1900, nearly 12 million Africans were shipped from Africa across the Atlantic Ocean—the so-called "Middle Passage"—primarily to colonies in North America, South America, and the West Indies.

# AFRICAN LIFE: AN OVERVIEW

African life was organized around the family. Men commonly had multiple wives, creating numerous branches within the same family. Descendants, therefore, were traced through the mother. This is called matrilineal succession. Branches of the same family made up a tribe.

Religion, art, and dance were prominent features of African life.

Many Africans believed in a supreme deity who created the earth and in other lesser gods who managed different aspects of human life. Ancestor worship and a belief in fate were also common. The life force of the creator was believed to be present in all things—both animate and inanimate.

Arts and crafts were handed down from mother to daughter. Africans were very skilled at making cloth and beautiful clothing. The art of weaving and dying is considered to be one of three or four original art forms. Beautiful carvings in ivory and wood, showing evidence of great skill, have been found in West Africa. Bronze sculptures found in Benin (Nigeria) are some of the most valuable in the world. Archaeologists trace this art as far back as 2000 B.C. The welding of iron may have been a gift to civilization from the black people of West Africa. Togoland is probably the oldest iron working area in Africa. The processing of other metals was an important influence on West African culture.

African drumming, composed of intricate

rhythms, served as a kind of universal language, enabling blacks to communicate all over Africa. The legacy of African music and dance with its distinctive melodies, elaborate rhythms, and power of feeling is evident in the traditional and contemporary music of West Indian blacks and the spirituals of early African Americans.

African life presented many challenges. The tribal structure of African society required cooperation and the ability to be responsible for the needs of the tribe. These characteristics were vital to their survival.

The early civilizations of West Africa were complex and efficient military monarchies, supported and enforced by large armies of dedicated soldiers. These governments collected taxes, took censuses, drafted armies, established courts of law, and encouraged the development of learning, religion, arts, and tribal responsibility.





# ■ AFRICAN LIFE: STUDY OUTLINE —

Complete this outline of African life. If necessary, use another piece of paper. When you have finished, use the outline for an oral or written review.

## I. African family

- A. One man—several wives
- B. Matrilineal succession—descendants traced through the mother
- C. Several branches to same family formed a tribe.

## II. African religion

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_
- D. \_\_\_\_\_

## III. African art

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_
- D. \_\_\_\_\_
- E. \_\_\_\_\_

## IV. African music and dance

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

## V. West African civilizations

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_