

Early Societies in West Africa

Essential Question: *What was the most significant factor in the development of early societies in West Africa?*

Introduction

People have lived in West Africa for tens of thousands of years. For most of this time, historians do not have written records to study. Muslim scholars first began writing about the kingdom of **Ghana** in the 800s. By then, Ghana was perhaps 300 years old, and possibly much older. How did the first kingdoms arise? Why did they develop where they did?

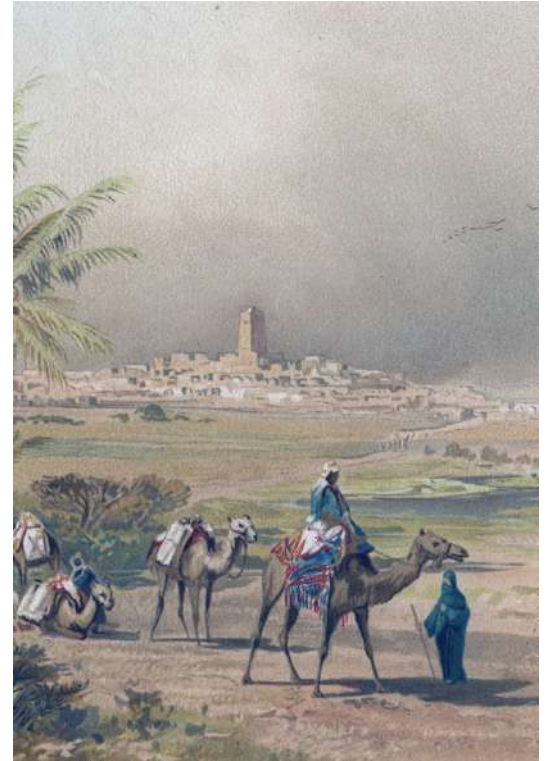
To answer questions like these, historians and archaeologists study many kinds of clues. For example, they look closely at geography. Natural features, such as rivers and vegetation, help explain why people chose to settle where they did and what kind of life they created for themselves.

Additionally, scholars try to understand evidence from ancient settlements. How were villages and towns laid out? What can this reveal about life there?

Items left by earlier cultures also provide helpful clues about the past. Iron farming tools, for example, show that agricultural methods improved in West Africa. Scholars have worked to understand how more **efficient [functioning in the best way, with very little or no waste]** farming affected the growth of towns and cities.

Gradually, scholars have pieced together a picture of how complex societies developed in West Africa.

Between about 500 and 1600 C.E., three kingdoms arose in West Africa: **Ghana, Songhai, and Mali**. In this lesson, you will explore current thinking about the origins of West African kingdoms. You will discover how early family-based communities developed into villages. You will also learn how some villages were able to expand into towns and cities. Finally, you will see how some cities became great kingdoms.



Behind the caravan is Timbuktu, a city in the early West African kingdom of Mali.

1. Geography and Trade

Geography offers many clues about why people settle where they do and how they live. It also helps explain patterns of trade. As you will see throughout this lesson, trade played a critical role in the growth and advancement of West African societies. Let's examine the geography of West Africa and its influence on trade.

Geography In the north, West Africa begins in the **Sahara [a large, hot desert in North Africa that covers about 3.5 million square miles]**. To the west and south, the region is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean. To the east, it is bordered by the mountains of the present-day country of Cameroon. West Africa includes varied vegetation zones of desert, semidesert, savanna, and forest.

The Sahara spreads across approximately 3.5 million square miles in North Africa and the northern part of West Africa. Although sand dunes cover one-quarter of the Sahara, this desert also has bare, rocky plains, and even mountains. The Sahara is very dry except for some scattered oases, or water sources with some vegetation, so it was not a suitable location for large settlements.

South of the Sahara is a zone of semidesert called the **Sahel [a zone of semidesert, south of the Sahara, where short grasses, small bushes, and a few trees grow]**. The Sahel is not as dry as the Sahara, and it has enough water for short grasses, some small bushes, and trees to survive.

The southern part of the Sahel merges into the **savanna [a vegetation zone of tall grasses and scattered trees, with a long rainy season]**, an area of tall grasses and scattered trees. The savanna has a long rainy season, so grains such as millet, sorghum, and rice can thrive there. Grasses provide food for cattle, camels, goats, and sheep. Rivers, such as the long **Niger River [the longest river in West Africa, and a kind of trading highway in early times]**, help fertilize nearby land and also provide fish for eating.



As they did in the past, people still use canoes to travel along the Niger River. This portion of the river is in the forest zone in the southern part of West Africa.

The Niger River extends into the forest zone, a much wetter area than the savanna, located in the southern part of West Africa. Its northern part is a woodland forest of trees and shrubs. Oil palms, yams, and kola trees grow here. The southern part of the zone is lush rainforest, where rain falls year-round. In the rainforest, tall trees—such as mahogany and teak—rise above swamps and lagoons.

Trade The geography of West Africa influenced the patterns of trade that developed there. Different resources are found in each of the **vegetation zones**. As a result, people living in different zones had to trade to acquire items they could not provide for themselves. For example, people on the savanna may have traded grains for yams or mahogany from forest dwellers.

While several major rivers served as trading routes in West Africa, the region's longest river, the Niger, became a kind of trading highway. People in ancient times traveled the Niger and other rivers by canoe to trade goods. Some traders also crossed the Sahara from North Africa, but most early trade was among West African settlements.

2. Early Communities and Villages

By about 4000 B.C.E., some people had settled to farm south of the Sahara. The earliest farming communities were comprised of extended families, which included close relatives, such as grandparents, as well as aunts, uncles, and cousins.

An **extended-family** community might have had about 15 to 20 members. Each community produced most of the things it required. Family members worked together to clear the fields, plant seeds, and harvest crops. These

Early West African villages might have had homes, such as these, built close together for protection. These early communities traded with one another to get resources they could not produce on their own.



small communities traded with one another for additional goods. Very likely, one of the male elders made decisions for the family community.

Eventually, family-based communities joined together to form villages that might contain one- to two-hundred people. The village leader was probably selected for his wisdom and strength.

Extended families usually banded together in villages to get needed help. For example, people might need to collaborate to control a flooding river or to mine for iron or gold. They may also have united for protection. Archaeologists have discovered ruins of high walls and gates at the ancient West African village of Dhar Tichitt, in the present-day country of Mauritania. These structures suggest that the villagers united to defend themselves from outside attacks.

3. The Development of Towns and Cities

Some West African villages gradually developed into towns and cities. Although some had thousands of residents, ancient cities in West Africa were not as large as modern cities. Why did villages grow into cities in West Africa? Two important reasons were the growth of ironworking and the expansion of trade.

Ironworking and Trade: The Hittites of present-day Turkey mastered ironworking as long ago as 1500 B.C.E. Gradually, the knowledge of ironworking spread and eventually reached West Africa, perhaps by way of traders who crossed the Sahara. However, some scholars think that ironworking flourished independently among people in the northern part of West Africa.

By the 500s B.C.E., a people called the **Nok [a people living in West Africa in the 500s B.C.E. who mastered ironworking]**, who resided in what is now central Nigeria, made iron tools. Archaeologists have found some important **artifacts [an item left by an earlier culture]** of the Nok culture, such as their iron tools and iron-smelting furnaces.

Smelting [the process of melting ore to produce iron or other metals from it] is the process of melting ore to extract iron or other metals. The Nok used enormous amounts of charcoal to fuel their iron-smelting furnaces. Skilled workers called blacksmiths hammered and bent the red-hot iron into useful tools like axes, hoes, and weapons, such as spears.



Iron tools made farming more efficient and productive. This allowed people to devote more time to weaving, still practiced today, as well as other crafts.

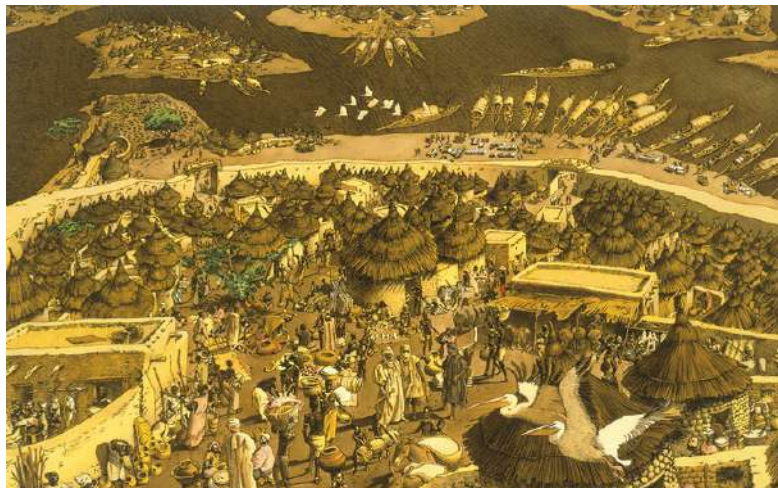
The valuable craft of ironworking spread rapidly throughout West Africa. The ability to make tools out of iron brought major changes. With iron tools, farmers could clear land and cultivate crops more efficiently than with stone tools. The greater abundance of food supported larger villages, where more people were free to pursue other trades, such as weaving, metalworking, and pottery making. More and more, villages produced surplus food and handcrafted goods. They could then trade their surpluses for goods they could not produce themselves.

As goods traveled across West Africa, villages located along rivers or other easily traveled routes became important trading sites. Villages that controlled the trade routes became market centers, and the inhabitants became wealthy by charging fees for trading activity. Additionally, these villages drew many people to work at new jobs, such as supervising trade, learning crafts, and helping to construct public buildings.

Some villages expanded into sizable towns and cities. Other large settlements were able to grow because of nearby natural resources, such as iron ore and good farmland.

The Ancient City of Jenne-Jeno:

In 1977, archaeologists began excavating the ancient West African city of **Jenne-jeno** [an ancient West African city built along the Niger River] (jen-NAH jen-OH). Built in the 3rd century B.C.E., Jenne-jeno existed for more than 1,600 years. Before its rediscovery, historians believed that cities did not exist in West Africa until outsiders arrived and helped local people build them. However, the discovery of Jenne-jeno proved this theory wrong.



This is an artist's depiction of the ancient city of Jenne-jeno. Its location along the Niger River was less than two miles from the modern city of Jenne. What signs of trade can you find in this illustration?

Jenne-jeno was built where the Niger River intersects the Bani River, an ideal location for farming, fishing, and trade. The people of Jenne-jeno traded their surplus goods—such as catfish, fish oil, onions, and rice—for salt, iron ore, copper, and gold. The iron ore came from 50 miles away and the copper from 600 miles away.

Jenne-jeno grew into a busy city of about 20,000 people. It was surrounded by a wall 10 feet wide and 13 feet high. The wall may have been built to give the city more status and to make it easier to control the arrival and departure of traders.

The people of Jenne-jeno lived in circular houses. Initially, they built the houses from bent poles and woven mats, but they later used mud blocks.

The city's people participated in many crafts. Besides farmers and fishers, there were potters, metalsmiths, weavers, leatherworkers, bead makers, and ivory carvers.

The most respected people in Jenne-jeno were **blacksmiths** because the people of West Africa prized iron more than gold. They were amazed by blacksmiths' ability to make tools from iron. As in many other cultures, early West Africans thought blacksmiths had supernatural (magical or godlike) powers. For this reason, blacksmiths had authority and many responsibilities including the ability to act as political leaders, judges, and doctors. Some even believed they could **predict [to say what will happen in the future, based on experience or reason]** the future.

In recent years, scientists have **analyzed [to examine or think about carefully]** the sites of other ancient cities in West Africa. They have found evidence of trade, craftsmanship, and great wealth.

4. The Rise of Kingdoms and Empires

Trade was a major factor in the rise of West African kingdoms. Because Ghana, Mali, and Songhai were all trading powers that ruled over large areas, historians often refer to them as empires, as well as kingdoms.

How did these first kingdoms develop? The rulers of some trading cities in West Africa became wealthy by collecting taxes from the goods that were purchased and sold. With their wealth, they could afford to

raise large armies to conquer other trading areas nearby. Then the ruler could take over the trade of those areas and become even wealthier.

Rulers also collected **tribute [payment made by one ruler or country to another for protection or as a sign of submission]** from the people they conquered. The payment of tribute was an indication that the conquered people accepted the king's authority. Tribute could also pay for the king's protection from outside attackers.

West African kings were both the political and the religious leaders of their kingdoms. People believed that the gods gave them special powers. The kings performed religious ceremonies to please the gods.

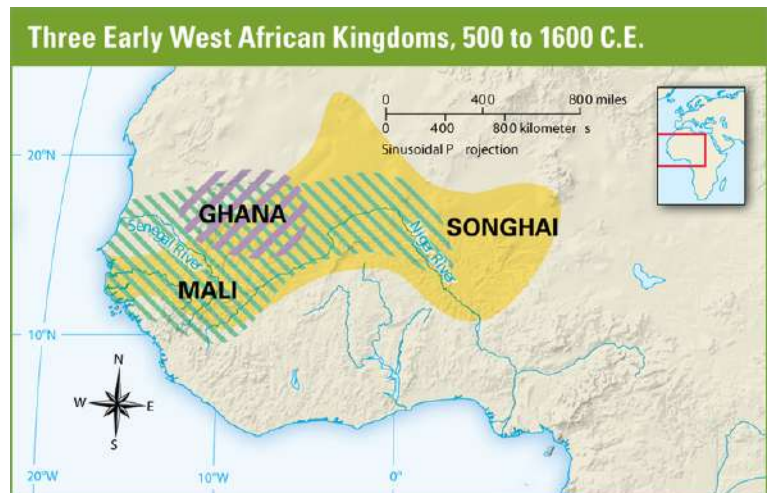
As a king conquered more territory, the kingdom became an empire. Occasionally, a king sent a governor to rule a conquered area, while other times he allowed conquered people to rule themselves.



These modern horsemen from West Africa are a reminder of the armies that rulers were able to raise with the wealth they received from trade. Rulers also acquired wealth from tributes.

Becoming part of a kingdom or an empire had disadvantages such as the obligation to pay tribute. Another was that men had to serve in the king's army. However, there were also advantages. Kings provided protection for the conquered territory. Armies ensured that trade routes remained safe, and they kept out raiders and foreign armies. Wars between small cities ended. Kings collected luxury goods from their subjects and distributed them fairly throughout the kingdom. They also gave expensive presents to their governors.

The great kingdoms of West Africa did not rely only on local trade. By the time Ghana became a significant power, trans-Saharan trade was directing new wealth to West Africa from other regions, such as the present-day Middle East. Control of trade, particularly in West African gold, was also crucial to the power of Mali. Songhai, too, relied on trade with distant lands.



Three major kingdoms—Ghana, Songhai, and Mali—arose in West Africa between 500 and 1600 C.E. Each of these kingdoms benefitted from trade.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you learned how kingdoms and empires grew out of early societies in West Africa.

Geography and Trade Geography was a major factor in the development of West African societies. Settled communities flourished south of the Sahara, where the land permitted farming. Geography also influenced trading patterns. Communities traded with one another for items they could not produce locally. Rivers, such as the Niger, served as trade routes.

Early Communities Early societies in West Africa were family-based communities. Some of these communities combined to form villages, which allowed them to take advantage of natural resources and to defend themselves from attack.

Towns and Cities Ironworking and trade helped some villages grow into sizable towns and cities. Iron tools allowed farmers to cultivate food more efficiently. As a result, more people could engage in other crafts. Villages traded their surplus goods for items they could not make themselves. Some villages became important trading sites and expanded into cities. Others developed into large communities near important resources, such as iron ore or gold.

Kingdoms and Empires Trade brought some cities great wealth. The rulers of the wealthiest cities conquered neighboring areas, leading to the rise of kingdoms and empires. Rulers gained even more wealth through tribute, as well as by controlling trade.

