



Mali Carved
Mask

People of West Africa

Background Information

Some of the West African countries that border the Atlantic Ocean are Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Much of this area is covered by tropical rain forests.

Senegal and parts of Mauritania also border the Atlantic, but the land shifts from savannas to shrublands to the Sahara.

The landscape of the inland countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger ranges from savannas to desert.

At one time, some of the major groups were the **Hausa**, **Yoruba**, **Fulani**, and **Ashanti**. West Africans have survived the domination of powerful ancient kingdoms, Middle Eastern invasions, European conquests, and the debilitating slave trade. Their customs and beliefs are hundreds of years old.

Early Migrations and Daily Life

West Africans originated from the late-Stone Age people of the Sahara. The Sahara was once lush and tropical. The first inhabitants lived in hundreds of scattered villages along riverbanks. As the region slowly dried up, groups migrated into more inhabitable land.

It is believed that about 4,000 years ago many groups ventured further south into tropical rain forests. They ate yams, millet, wild grains, onions, roots, kola nuts, watermelons, snails, and fish. Cassava from South America was introduced in the fifteenth century. In the drier sub-Saharan climates, people owned goats and cattle. However, domesticated animals were not kept in the rain forest because disease-breeding insects would infect and kill the herds.

West Africa was rich in minerals. Some records indicate that gold was so prevalent that it could be found lying in streams. People collected gemstones, mined for copper and gold, and harvested rock salt from dry riverbeds. Everyone was allowed to mine for gold, but a certain amount was given to the king.

FACT

Salt was such a valuable commodity that it was traded pound for pound for gold.

As with many rich kingdoms, owning slaves was commonplace. Before the arrival of Europeans, West Africans were accosted and forced into slavery only during intertribal wars. Often, owners would marry their enslaved captives.

Customs and Beliefs

West Africans relied on large extended families for child rearing and survival. The Ashanti built family compounds throughout their villages. A wealthy man might have two or more wives living in separate huts. Both parents helped raise their children. Children learned to behave in public, honor their elders, and respect each other's property. At the age of eight, boys were sent to their fathers' huts for further training and instruction. Girls remained with their mothers and were taught to farm, keep house, and cook.

In the ninth century, Arab traders introduced Islam to West Africans. West Africans were initially opposed to this religion, but Muslim trader-clerics were vigilant in claiming converts. Some West African kings accepted this new religion for political purposes, thus opening the door to influence local populations.

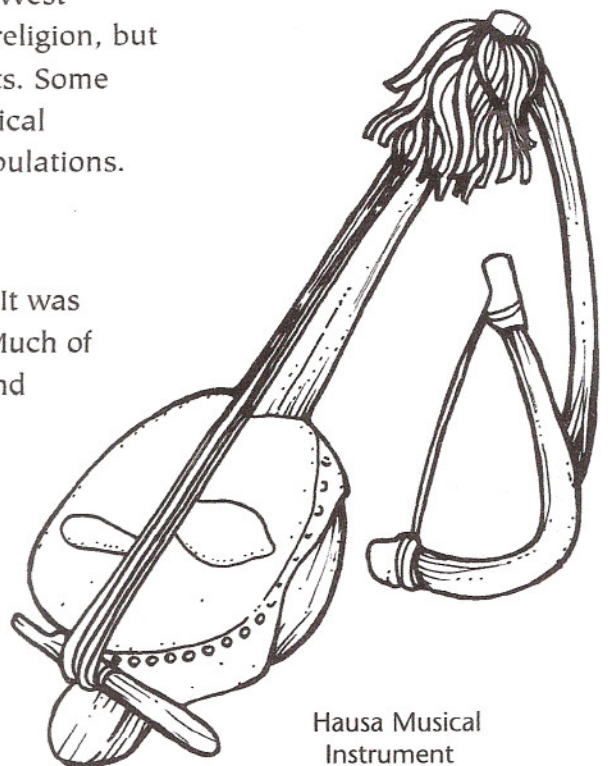
Ancient Kingdoms of the Savanna

Gold was the major commodity in West African history. It was traded with North Africans for salt as early as 500 B.C. Much of the gold used during the Roman Empire, Middle Ages, and Renaissance came from West Africa. During the seventh century A.D., Arab traders became the major controllers of the gold-salt trade. Their relationship with West Africa lasted more than 1,000 years.

Due to the wealth of this region, several ancient kingdoms emerged. Three early classical kingdoms were Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. The Kingdom of Ghana first arose around A.D. 700. During this time, Timbuktu developed into a major economic port for the gold-salt trade and became the center of religion, culture, and education. A mosque was built to train Muslim clerics, and scholars studied philosophy, medicine, and mathematics.

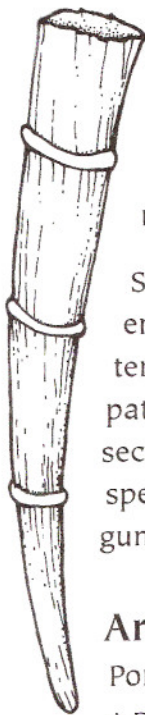
FACT

Ancient Ashanti kings wore gold castanets on their fingers and used them to silence their courts.



Hausa Musical Instrument

Ivory Tusk
Horn



The Kingdom of Ghana was absorbed into the Kingdom of Mali in A.D. 1200. This new kingdom had great political power. It became a major trading empire whose territories reached farther west than its predecessor.

Songhai, the greatest kingdom of classical West Africa, emerged in A.D. 1350. This kingdom slowly usurped the territory of Mali. It grew so large that its soldiers could not patrol the outer regions. Moroccans, who were searching for secret gold mines, attacked outlying villages. The Songhai army's spears and arrows could not match the Moroccans' cannons and guns. Songhai fell under Moroccan power in A.D. 1590.

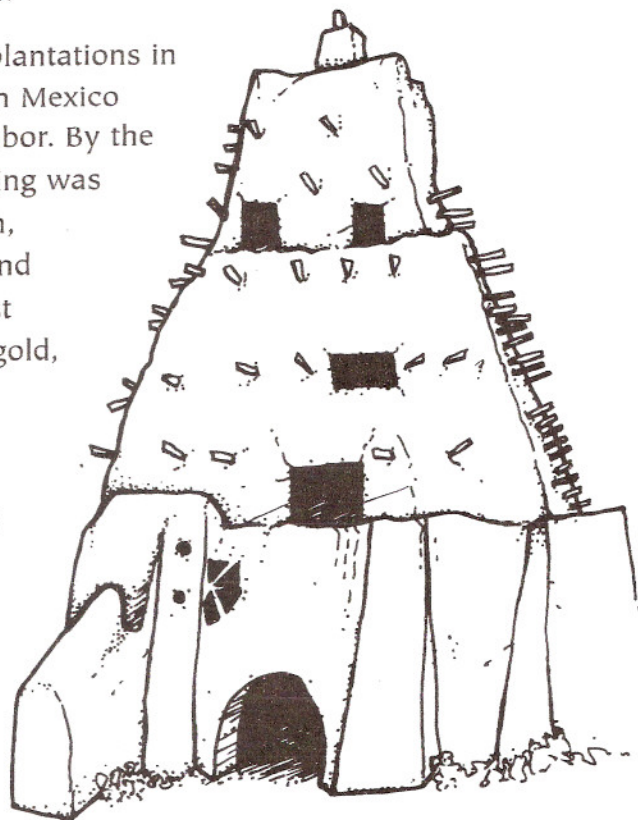
Arrival of Europeans

Portuguese sailors first landed on the west coast of Africa in A.D. 1470. Aware of its gold reserves, they sought to establish direct trade with the West Africans. The Portuguese built a fort called El Mina after finding the Ashanti gold mines. El Mina held goods and gold received in trade. The Portuguese and the Ashanti pursued trade with each other and became wealthy. West Africans were influenced by Portuguese missionaries, machinery, guns, and new foods.

FACT

"Talking" drums were used to broadcast news throughout the territory. Everyone understood the language of the drums.

The Spanish sugar plantations in the Caribbean and in Mexico required imported labor. By the 1700s, slave trafficking was rampant. The British, Spaniards, Danes, and French came to West Africa in pursuit of gold, ivory, and slaves. In 1791, Great Britain outlawed the slave trade and in 1820 it abolished slavery.



Fourteenth-Century Sankore
Mosque at Timbuktu