Lesson 1 West African Culture and Daily Life

BEFORE YOU READ
In this lesson, you will learn about daily life, the development of the economy, and the oral tradition in early West Africa.

AS YOU READ
Use this chart to take notes about the main sections in this chapter. Answering the questions at the end of each section will help you fill in the chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village life in West Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and regional commerce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The oral tradition in West Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Village Life in West Africa
(pages 151–152)
What role did families play in West African society?

From 300 to 1500, powerful empires controlled much of West Africa. Most West Africans dealt with their ruler only for court cases and taxes. Many of these people felt a strong loyalty to their village and family.

Family relationships were very important in West Africa. Kinship groups formed the government of many African societies. These groups were equal in power. A council of the kinship groups’ eldest members often made the decisions. Kinship groups with a common ancestor often formed larger groups called clans. Clan members usually followed the same rules.

In West African villages, the way of life for most people centered on farming. Women prepared food and cared for children. They also made pottery and worked in the fields. Men looked after large animals, such as cattle. They also cleared land for farming and built houses and fences. Children often gathered firewood. In addition, they helped their fathers and mothers.

Some people focused on specific types of work such as farming or trading. This is called labor specialization. Labor specialization led to a diverse West African economy. Most people practiced an economy based on farming. Others focused on herding animals or metalworking. Iron technology allowed Africans to create stronger agricultural tools and weapons. As a result, they became wealthier. Also, their population grew. Finally, some people traded goods within West Africa. They also traded with other regions, such as North Africa.

1. What types of work did West Africans specialize in?
How did trading develop in West Africa?

By A.D. 300, population growth and trade had led to the development of West African cities. Gold mining and trade in slaves led to more contact with North Africa. Local and international trade increased. As a result, the cities became more important centers of trade. They also became centers of politics, religion, and education.

Trade between West and North Africa continued to grow. West Africans received salt, cloth, and metal wares from Arab traders. In return, West Africans provided gold, slaves, ivory, and cattle hides.

West African societies gradually developed complex trade systems. Soon kings arose in West African societies. The king kept trade running smoothly. As a result, many people were loyal to him. In addition, kings often played an important role in religion. They were expected to help the economy by performing prayers and rituals.

2. What was the relationship between kings and trade in West Africa?

The Oral Tradition in West Africa

What is oral history?

For centuries, West Africans had no written language. Because of this, they did not record their history in written form. West Africans passed on their history through a collection of stories. These stories were about people and spiritual forces in the natural world. The storytellers were called griots. They often used music in their stories.

The stories entertained and educated. The griots passed on a clan’s or kinship group’s history. West Africans believed their departed ancestors watched over them. They thought that their ancestors could help the living communicate with the creator of the universe. During religious rituals, West Africans appealed to ancestors for favor and protection. Griots often took part in these rituals.

Griots sang for kings, other powerful people, and common villagers. Griots acted out various characters in a story. The audience often participated. Griots are still an important part of West African culture.

3. With no written language, how did early West Africans pass on their history?