

# West African Societies Around 1492

## MAIN IDEA

West Africa in the 1400s was home to a variety of peoples and cultures.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Modern African Americans have strong ancestral ties to the people of West Africa.

## Terms & Names

- Islam
- plantation
- Songhai
- savanna
- Benin
- Kongo
- lineage

## One African's Story

Leo Africanus was about 18 when he laid eyes on the renowned city of Timbuktu in the West African empire of Songhai. A Muslim born in Granada (in modern Spain) and raised in North Africa, Leo Africanus visited the city with his uncle, who was on a diplomatic mission to the emperor of Songhai. At the time of their journey in 1513, Songhai was one of the largest kingdoms in the world, and the emperor, Askia Muhammad, was rich and powerful. Leo Africanus later described the bustling prosperity of Timbuktu and its lively intellectual climate.

### A PERSONAL VOICE LEO AFRICANUS

“Here are many shops of . . . merchants, and especially such as weave linen and cotton cloth. And hither do the Barbary [North African] merchants bring cloth of Europe. . . . Here are great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the king's cost and charges, and hither are brought divers manuscripts or written books out of Barbary, which are sold for more money than any other merchandise.”

—*The History and Description of Africa Done into English* by John Pory

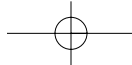
Leo Africanus provides a glimpse of 16th-century West African life. From this region of Africa, and particularly from the West and West-Central coastal areas, would come millions of people brought to the Americas as slaves. These people would have a tremendous impact on American history and culture.



▲ These ancient boards from Africa contain sayings from the Qur'an, the holy scripture of Islam.

## West Africa Connects with the Wider World

Although geographically isolated from Europe and Asia, West Africa by the 1400s had long been connected to the wider world through trade. For centuries, trade had brought into the region new goods, new ideas, and new beliefs, including those of the Islamic religion. Then, in the mid-1400s, the level of interaction with the world increased with the arrival of European traders on the West African coast.



**THE SAHARA HIGHWAY** The Timbuktu that Leo Africanus described was the hub of a well-established trading network that connected most of West Africa to the coastal ports of North Africa, and through these ports to markets in Europe and Asia. Leo Africanus and his uncle reached Timbuktu by following ancient trade routes across the Sahara desert. At the crossroads of this trade, cities such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne became busy commercial centers. The empires that controlled these cities and trade routes grew wealthy and powerful.

Traders from North Africa brought more than goods across the Sahara—they also brought their Islamic faith. **Islam**, founded in Arabia in 622 by the prophet Muhammad, spread quickly across the Middle East and North Africa. By the 1200s, Islam had become the court religion of the large empire of Mali, and it was later embraced by the rulers of Songhai, including Askia Muhammad. Despite its official status, however, Islam did not yet have much influence over the daily lives and religious practices of most West Africans in the late 1400s. **A**

**MAIN IDEA**

**Making Inferences**

**A** Why would trade have helped spread the Islamic faith?

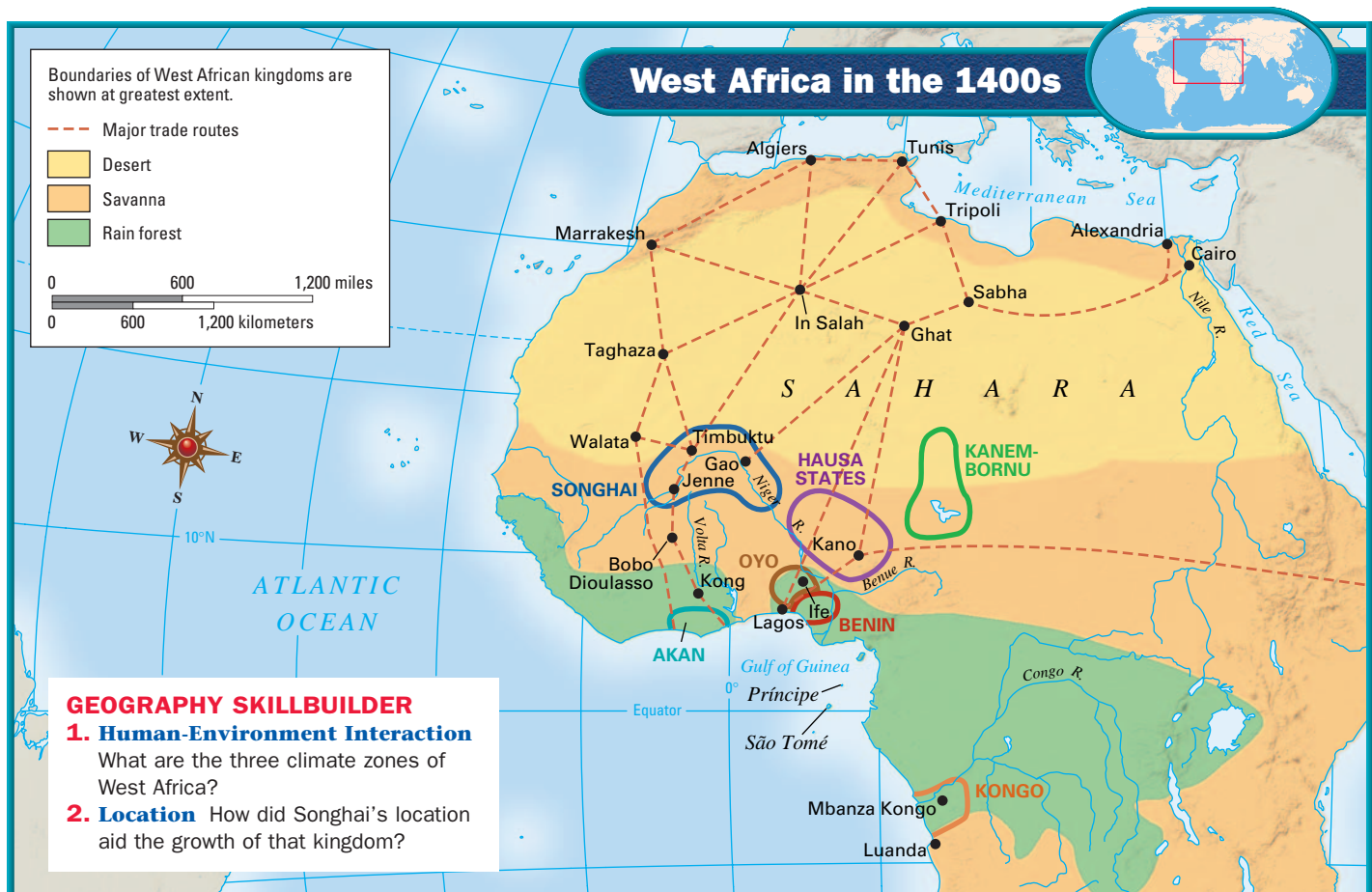
**THE PORTUGUESE ARRIVE** The peoples of West Africa and Europe knew little of each other before the 1400s. This situation began to change as Portuguese mariners made trading contacts along the West African coast. By the 1470s, Portuguese traders had established an outpost on the West African coast near the large Akan goldfields, the source of much West African gold. Other trading outposts soon

**HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT**

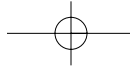
**ISLAM**

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is monotheistic, or based on the belief in one god. Islam was founded by the prophet Muhammad (about A.D. 570–632), who believed the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him to preach a new religion to the Arabs. This religion became known as Islam, which in Arabic means “surrender” [to Allah]. (Allah is the Arabic name for God.) The followers of Islam are called Muslims, “those who submit to God’s will.”

The words that Muhammad received from God were recorded in the Qur’an, the holy book of Islam.



- GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER**
- 1. Human-Environment Interaction**  
What are the three climate zones of West Africa?
  - 2. Location** How did Songhai’s location aid the growth of that kingdom?



followed. These early contacts between West Africans and Portuguese traders would have two significant consequences for West Africa and the Americas. First, direct trade between the Portuguese and the coastal peoples of West Africa bypassed the old trade routes across the Sahara and pulled the coastal region into a closer relationship with Europe. Second, the Portuguese began the European trade in West African slaves.

In the 1480s the Portuguese claimed two uninhabited islands off the African coast, Príncipe and São Tomé. Discovering that the soil and climate were perfect for growing sugar cane, they established large sugar plantations there. A **plantation** is a farm on which a single crop, usually one that requires much human labor, is grown on a large scale. To work these plantations, the Portuguese began importing slaves from the West African mainland.

At first this trade was limited to a small number of West Africans purchased from village chiefs, usually captives from rival groups. However, the success of the Portuguese slave plantations provided a model that would be reproduced on a larger scale in the Americas—including the British North American colonies. **B**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

**B** How did the Portuguese sugar plantations affect the course of history?

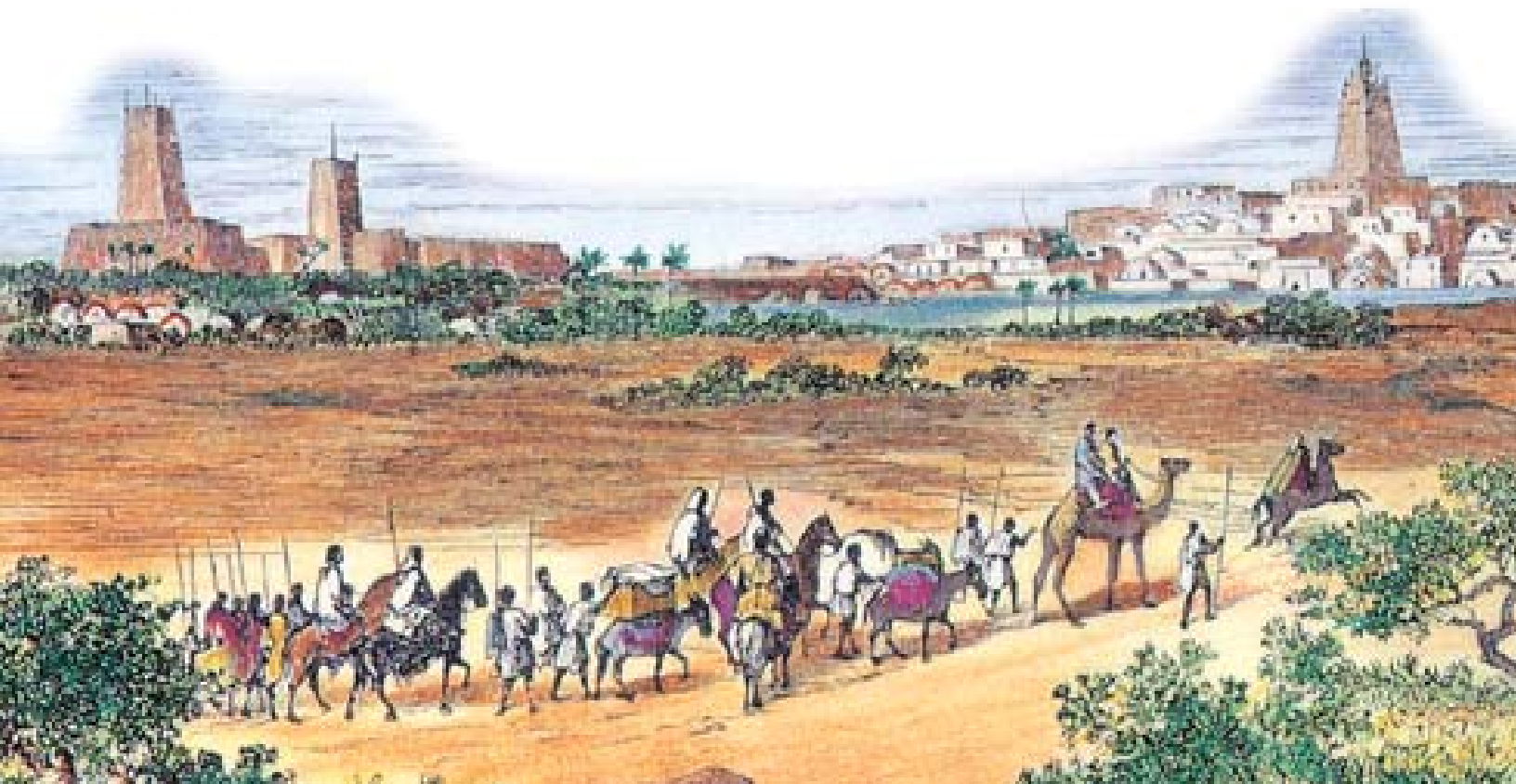
## Three African Kingdoms Flourish

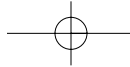
In the late 1400s, western Africa was a land of thriving trade, diverse cultures, and many rich and well-ordered states.

**SONGHAÏ** From about 600 to 1600, a succession of empires—first Ghana, then Mali, and beginning in the mid-1400s, **Songhai** (sông'hī)—gained power and wealth by controlling the trans-Saharan trade. The rulers of these empires grew enormously rich by taxing the goods that passed through their realms.

With wealth flowing in from the north-south trade routes, the rulers of Songhai could raise large armies and conquer new territory. They could also build cities, administer laws, and support the arts and education. So it was with two great rulers of the Songhai. The first great king, Sunni Ali, who ruled from 1464 to 1492, made Songhai the largest West African empire in history. His military prowess became legendary—during his entire reign, he never lost a battle.

A desert caravan reaches the fabled Songhai city of Timbuktu.





Another great ruler, Askia Muhammad, was a master organizer, a devout Muslim, and a scholar. He organized Songhai into administrative districts and appointed officials to govern, collect taxes, and regulate trade, agriculture, and fishing. Under his rule, Timbuktu regained its reputation as an important education center as it attracted scholars from all over the Islamic world.


At its height in the 1500s, Songhai's power extended across much of West Africa. However, it did not control the forest kingdoms. Songhai's cavalry might easily thunder across the **savanna**, the region of dry grassland, but it could not penetrate the belt of dense rain forest along the southern coast. Protected by the forest, peoples such as the Akan, Ibo, Edo, Ifi, Oyo, and Yoruba lived in kingdoms that thrived in the 1400s and 1500s.

**BENIN** Although the forests provided protection from conquest, they nevertheless allowed access for trade. Traders carried goods out of the forests or paddled them along the Niger River to the savanna. The brisk trade with Songhai and North Africa, and later with Portugal, helped the forest kingdoms grow. In the 1400s one of these kingdoms, **Benin**, dominated a large region around the Niger Delta. Leading the expansion was a powerful oba (ruler) named Ewuare. Stories that have been passed down to the present day recall Ewuare's triumphs in the mid-1400s.

#### **A PERSONAL VOICE** CHIEF JACOB EGHAREVBA

**“He fought against and captured 201 towns and villages. . . . He took their rulers captive and he caused the people to pay tribute to him. He made good roads in Benin City. . . . In fact the town rose to importance and gained the name of city during his reign. It was he who had the innermost and greatest of the walls and ditches made round the city, and he also made powerful charms and had them buried at each of the nine gateways of the city so as to ward against any evil.”**

—*A Short History of Benin*

Within this great walled city, Ewuare headed a highly organized government in which districts were governed by appointed chiefs. Through other appointed officials, the oba controlled trade and managed the metal-working industries such as goldsmithing and brass-smithing. He also exchanged ambassadors with Portugal in the late 1400s. Under the patronage of Ewuare and his successors, metalworkers produced stunning and sophisticated works of art, such as bronze sculptures and plaques. 

**KONGO** Within another stretch of rain forest, in West Central Africa, the powerful kingdom of **Kongo** arose on the lower Zaire (Congo) River. In the late 1400s, Kongo consisted of a series of small kingdoms ruled by a single leader called the Manikongo, who lived in what is today Angola. The Manikongo, who could be either a man or a woman, held kingdoms together by a system of royal marriages, taxes, and, when necessary, by war and tribute. By the 1470s, the Manikongo oversaw an empire estimated at over 4 million people.

The Bakongo, the people of Kongo, mined iron ore and produced well-wrought tools and weapons. They also wove palm leaf threads into fabric that reminded Europeans of velvet. The Portuguese sailors who first reached Kongo in 1483 were struck by the similarities between Kongo and their own world. Its system of government—a collection of provinces centralized under one strong king—resembled that of many European nations at the time.

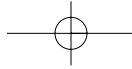


**▲** An unknown Yoruba artist in the kingdom of Ife produced this bronze head of a king in the 1100s. The highly developed bronze artistry of Ife was handed down to the kingdom of Benin, which arose later in the same area.

#### **MAIN IDEA**

#### **Comparing**

**C** How was the government in Benin similar to that of Askia Muhammad?



## West African Culture

In the late 1400s the world of most West Africans was a local one. Most people lived in small villages, where life revolved around family, the community, and tradition. West African customs varied greatly but followed some common patterns. These patterns would influence the future interactions between Africans and Europeans and shape the experience of enslaved Africans in the Americas.

**FAMILY AND GOVERNMENT** Bonds of kinship—ties among people of the same **lineage**, or line of common descent—formed the basis of most aspects of life in rural West Africa. Some societies, such as the Akan, were matrilineal—that is, people traced their lineage through their mother’s family. These lineage ties determined not only family loyalties but also inheritances and whom people could marry. Societies such as the Ibo also encouraged people to find a mate outside their lineage groups. These customs helped create a complex web of family alliances.

Within a family, age carried rank. The oldest living descendant of the group’s common ancestor controlled family members and represented them in councils of the larger groups to which a family might belong. These larger groups shared a common language and history and often a common territory. One leader or chief might speak for the group as a whole. But this person rarely spoke without consulting a council of elders made up of the heads of individual extended families.

**RELIGION** Religion was important in all aspects of African life. Political leaders claimed authority on the basis of religion. For example, the ruler of the Ife kingdom claimed descent from the first person placed on earth by the “God of the Sky.” Religious rituals were also central to the daily activities of farmers, hunters, and fishers. **D**

West Africans believed that nature was filled with spirits and perceived spiritual forces in both living and non-living objects. They also believed that the spirits of ancestors spoke to the village elders in dreams. Although West African peoples might worship a variety of ancestral spirits and lesser gods, most believed in a single creator. The Bakongo, for example, believed in *Nzambi ampungu*, a term that means the “creator of all things,” and so understood the Christian or Muslim belief in a supreme god. However, the Bakongo and other cultures could not

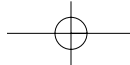
### MAIN IDEA

#### Hypothesizing

**D** Why did political leaders claim authority on the basis of religion?

Against the backdrop of centuries-old cliff dwellings built by their ancestors, modern-day Dogon elders in Mali carry out an ancient religious ritual.





understand the Christian and Muslim insistence that West Africans stop worshipping spirits, who were believed to carry out the Creator's work. Out of this difference grew many cultural conflicts.

**LIVELIHOOD** Throughout West Africa, people supported themselves by age-old methods of farming, herding, hunting, and fishing, and by mining and trading. Almost all groups believed in collective ownership of land. Individuals might farm the land, but it reverted to family or village ownership when not in use.

People on the dry savanna depended on rivers, such as the Niger, to nourish their crops and livestock. On the western coast, along the Senegal and Gambia rivers, farmers converted tangled mangrove swamps into rice fields. This grain—and the skills for growing it—would accompany West Africans to the Americas. **E**

**USE OF SLAVE LABOR** West Africans divided tasks by age and by social status. At the lowest rung in some societies were slaves. However, in Africa, people were not born into slavery, nor did slavery necessarily mean a lifetime of servitude. In Africa, slaves could escape their bondage in a number of ways. Sometimes they were adopted into or they married into the family they served. This was a very different kind of servitude from that which evolved in the Americas, where slavery continued from generation to generation and was based on race.

While slavery eventually came to dominate the interaction between Africans and Europeans, it was not the primary concern of the Portuguese sailors who first explored the African coast. At this time, in the late 1400s, a variety of political, social, and economic changes in Europe spurred rulers and adventurers to push outward into unexplored reaches of the ocean.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Developing Historical Perspective**

**E** What agricultural skills did West Africans bring to the Americas?

NOW & THEN

KENTE CLOTH

Today people of African descent all over the world value as a symbol of Africa the multicolored fabric known as kente cloth. For African Americans who choose to wear kente cloth or display it in their homes, the fabric serves as a tangible link to West African cultures from which their ancestors came.

Artisans of the Asante (Ashanti) people of modern Ghana have woven kente cloth for centuries. Working at looms, they produce long strips of cloth of complex designs and varying colors. These strips are then sewn together into a brilliant fabric that sparkles with reds, greens, blues, golds, and whatever other hues the weavers chose as dyes.





**ASSESSMENT**

**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Islam
- Songhai
- Benin
- lineage
- plantation
- savanna
- Kongo

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

Make an outline using the main topics shown below, and fill it in with factual details related to each topic.

- I. West Africa's Climate Zones
- II. West Africa's Major Geographical Features
- III. Three West African Kingdoms and Their Climate Zones

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. ANALYZING CAUSES**

What factors helped the trade system flourish in West Africa? Use evidence from the text to support your response. **Think About:**

- the geography of the region
- the kinds of goods exchanged
- the societies that emerged in West Africa

**4. ANALYZING EFFECTS**

What effects did Portuguese trade routes have on West Africa?

**5. CONTRASTING**

How did West African slavery differ from the kind of slavery that developed in the Americas?