AFRICA: Geography and Trading Kingdoms Notes

Instructions: Closely read the following notes on Africa. Then, complete the document exercise on a separate Google Doc. CLEARLY label your answers. Share your completed Google Doc with me. DUE: 3/27.

Geography of Africa
Africa is the second largest continent, covering ⅕ of the Earth’s land surface. Its geography is varied, and certain features have had a major impact on its development.

CLIMATE ZONES OF AFRICA

Rain Forests: Many outsiders mistakenly believe that Africa is covered with thick jungles. It is not. In fact, tropical rainforests cover less than 5% of the land, mostly along the equator. The rainforest region has thick trees and roots, making this region unsuitable for farming.

Savanna: Africa’s largest and most populated climate zone is the savanna, or grassy plains. The savanna has good soil and enough rainfall to support farming. However, there are irregular patterns of rainfall, which can cause long, deadly droughts. In parts of the savanna, the tsetse fly infects people and cattle with sleeping sickness. In other parts of the savanna, cattle herding is a common occupation.
**Dessert:** There are dry steppe zones that trail off to two major deserts. The Sahara is in the north, and it is the world’s largest desert. Although the Sahara did become the highway for trade, its size and harsh terrain limited movement. The Kalahari and Namib in the south are smaller but equally forbidding.

**Coast:** Along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, and at the tip of southern Africa, lie areas of fertile farmland. In addition to the rich farmland surrounding the Nile River, the coast offers a favorable environment for farmers.

**Movement**
Certain geographic features like deserts and rainforests have acted as barriers to the easy movement of people and goods. Also, even though Africa is surrounded by oceans and seas, it has very few good natural harbors. This is because much of the interior is a high plateau,
and as rivers flow down to the coast, they cascade through a series of rapids and cataracts (waterfalls) that hinder travel between the coast and the interior. Within the interior though, the same rivers (Zambezi, Congo, etc.) serve as open highways.

Despite geographic barriers, people did migrate, both within Africa and to neighboring continents. People moved through the Great Rift Valley of East Africa, and traveled across the savanna lands. The Red Sea and Indian Ocean linked East Africa to the Middle East and other Asian lands.

**Resources**

Since ancient times, Africa has had great mineral wealth. Salt, iron, gold, and copper were important commodities in early trade networks. In the 1800s, desire for gold and diamonds was one cause that led Europeans to seek control of territories in Africa. Most recently, nations in Africa have exported large quantities of oil.

**Migration of Peoples**

Archaeologists have uncovered evidence to pinpoint the Great Rift Valley of East Africa as the home of the earliest people. About 2500 BC, a climate change slowly dried out the Sahara. As the land became parched, the desert spread. This process was called **desertification**, and has continued to the present, devouring thousands of acres of cropland and pastureland each year. As the region dried, people retreated. Some moved north to the Mediterranean coast. They culturally diffused with local people, and became the ancestors of the Berbers who live there today. Others migrated south to the savanna or rain forests.

**Bantu Migrations**

Over thousands of years, other migrations contributed to the rich diversity of African peoples and cultures. Scholars have been able to trace these migrations by studying language patterns. They have learned that West African farmers and herders migrated to the south and east between about 500-1500 CE. Wherever they settled, they spread their skills in farming and ironworking. Like the Indo-European peoples who migrated across Europe and Asia, these West African peoples spoke a variety of languages that derived from a common root language: **Bantu**.

**Trading Kingdoms/City-States**

As the Sahara dried out, and migration took place, some Africans settled into farming villages. In time, villages grew into towns. Villagers traded any surplus food they produced. Gradually, a trade network linked the savanna to forest lands in the south and they channeled goods across the Sahara to the Mediterraean and Middle East. From West Africa,
caravans crossed the Sahara carrying leather goods, kola nuts, cotton cloth, and slaves. From North Africa, Arab and Berber merchants brought silk, steel, Venetian glass beads and horses. Two products, gold and salt, dominated the Saharan trade. Ghana, Mali, and Songhai quickly became the heart of West African trade.

How do we know what we know about early African kingdoms and city-states?
Objective: Describe how historians learn about the history of Africa using oral history and written sources.

Directions: Read the documents and respond to the questions.

Document 1:
Until the late colonial period, it was widely believed among Western historians that Africa, south of the Sahara, had no “civilization” and thus no history. Others insisted that even if there were events of a historical nature, such a history was unknown and unknowable, since African societies, for the most part, were non-literate and as such left no records that historians could study.

[...]

Using an array of sources, these scholars were successful in showing that Africa not only had a history but that its history and the writing of it date back to ancient Antiquity. Ancient and classical writers wrote about Africa, even though their writings were unsystematic. They were followed by Islamic and Arabic writers, who left first- or second-hand accounts of African states and societies that have continued to prove valuable for scholars of African history. The next phase of African historiography was dominated by European traders, travelers, as well as missionaries and other adventurers [...]


Why did some historians believe that Africa had no history?

What three sources have contemporary scholars and historians used to learn about the history of Africa?
The image to your left depicts griots. From this image, what can you infer about what role griots may have played in West African society?

Document 2b:

Context: Early and medieval African societies preserved their histories through written and oral literature. In West Africa, griots, a highly honored professional storyteller recited ancient stories that would be passed on from generation to generation. The griot is often viewed as a leader in their society because they preserve the history. One of the more well-known griot stories is the Epic of Sundiata. It tells the story of the hero Sundiata Keita (died 1255), the founder of the Mali Empire.

The West African epic of [Sundiata], the Mande king, has been transmitted orally by professional bards called griots (or jali in the Mande languages) since at least the fourteenth century. [Sundiata] Keita was a historical king of the Mandean Empire during the thirteenth century, but there are few written accounts of his life. Nearly all of what is known about him comes from variations of this famous oral tale, which over the centuries spread from Mali and Guinea to regions of Senegal, Gambia, and Burkina Faso.

The tale tells of a boy born to King Makhang and one of his wives, a deformed woman named Sogolon who is believed to have magical powers. [Sundiata] grows up bent and crippled like his mother, but he also apparently possesses her gift, for one day, angered by an insult to her, he uproots a baobab tree and grows instantly straight and tall (in some versions of the story he grows straight

What can we learn about Sundiata from the Epic of Sundiata?

What can we learn about West African history from the Epic of Sundiata?
simply by leaning against his mother’s shoulder). Even as a boy he possesses many virtues, including humility, strength, courage, and above all filial piety. [Sundiata] goes on to become a great king, surrounding himself with strong warriors and wise counsel. He defeats the Susa king Sumanguru through the use of wit and magic [...] [Sundiata] unites the territories surrounding his kingdom into the strongest and richest state of Africa.

The traditional role of the griots is an essential element in the tale of [Sundiata]. It was the duty of these storytellers to be the official memory of their kings, and thus of their people, connecting members of the community to one another as well as to their collective past. Griots were (and still are) trained in their art from childhood, acquiring the stories and legends of their ancestors, studying the tradition of oral poetry, and learning to accompany their stories on musical instruments, such as a twenty-one-string harp, a xylophone, or a small lute.


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<th>What can we learn about the importance to history and storytelling in West African culture from the <em>Epic of Sundiata</em>?</th>
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