

GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ How did West African culture influence the way African Americans lived?
- ▶ What role did gender play in the organization of West African village life?
- ▶ What were the principal features of the indigenous religion of West Africa?

KEY TERMS

- ▶ patrilineal, p. 24
- ▶ matrilineal, p. 24
- ▶ polygynous, p. 25
- ▶ indigenous, p. 26
- ▶ griots, p. 28

▶ Guide to Reading/Key Terms

For answers, see the *Teacher's Resource Manual*.

▶ Recommended Reading

Roland Oliver. *The African Experience: Major Themes in African History from Earliest Times to the Present*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. Short, innovative, and insightful analysis of cultural relationships.

Section 3

West African Society and Culture

West Africa's great ethnic and cultural diversity makes it hazardous to generalize about the social and cultural background of the first African Americans. But historians have pieced together a broad understanding of the way the people of West Africa lived at the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade.

Families and Villages

By the early sixteenth century, most West Africans were farmers. They usually lived in hamlets or villages composed of extended families and clans called **lineages**. Depending on the ethnic group involved, extended families and lineages were either **patrilineal** or **matrilineal**. In patrilineal societies, social rank and property passed in the male line from fathers to sons. In matrilineal societies, rank and property, although controlled by men, passed from generation to generation in the female line. A village chief in a matrilineal society was succeeded by his sister's son, not his own. But many West Africans lived in stateless societies with no government other than that provided by extended families and lineages.

In extended families, nuclear families (husband, wife, and children) or in some cases polygynous families (husband, wives, and children) acted as economic units. Both kinds of family units existed in the context of the broader family community composed of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Elders in the extended family had great power over the economic and social lives of its members. In contrast with ancient Egypt, strictly enforced incest taboos prohibited people from marrying within their extended family.

Village Life

Villages tended to be larger on the savannah than in the forest. In both regions, people used forced earth or mud to construct small houses, which were round or rectangular in shape, depending on local tradition. The houses usually had thatched roofs, or, sometimes in the forest, they had palm roofs. In both savannah and forest, mud or mud-brick walls up to 10 feet high surrounded villages. A nuclear or polygynous family unit might have several houses. In nuclear households, the hus-

band occupied the larger house and his wife the smaller. In **polygynous** households, the husband had the largest house, and his wives lived in smaller ones.

Villagers' few possessions included cots, rugs, stools, and wooden storage chests. Their tools and weapons included bows, spears, iron axes, hoes, and scythes. Households used grinding stones, woven baskets, and a variety of ceramic vessels to prepare and store food. Villagers in both the savannah and forest regions produced cotton for clothing, but their food crops were quite distinct. West Africans in the savannah cultivated millet, rice, and sorghum as their dietary staples; kept goats and cattle for milk and cheese; and supplemented their diets with peas, okra, watermelons, and a variety of nuts. Yams, rather than grains, were the dietary staple in the forest region. Other important forest region crops included bananas and coco yams, both ultimately derived from far-off Indonesia.

Farming in West Africa was not easy. Drought was common on the savannah. In the forest, where diseases carried by the tsetse fly sickened draft animals, agricultural plots were limited in size, because they had to be cleared by hand. The fields surrounding forest villages averaged just two or three acres per family.

Although there was private ownership of land in West Africa, people generally worked land communally, dividing tasks by gender. Among the Akan of the Guinea coast, for example, men were responsible for clearing the land of trees and underbrush while women tended the fields (planting, weeding, harvesting, and carrying in the harvested produce). Women also took care of children, prepared meals, and manufactured household pottery.

Women

In general, men dominated women in West Africa. As previously noted, it was common for men to take two or more wives, and, to a degree, custom held women to be the property of men. But West African women also enjoyed a relative amount of freedom that impressed Arab and European visitors. In ancient Ghana, women sometimes served as government officials. Later, in the forest region, women sometimes inherited property and owned land—or at least controlled its income. Women—including enslaved women—in the royal court of Dahomey held high government posts. Ashante noblewomen could own property, although they themselves could be considered inheritable property. The Ashante queen held her own court to administer women's affairs.

Women retained far more freedom in West Africa than was the case in Europe or southwest Asia. Ibn Battuta, a Muslim Berber from North Africa who visited Mali during the fourteenth century, was shocked to discover that in this Islamic country “women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves, though they are assiduous in attending prayer.” Battuta was even more dumbfounded to learn that in West

► [Retracing the Odyssey](#)

[Chattanooga African American Museum](#), Chattanooga, TN. The museum includes an exhibit dealing with African culture and history.

Africa women could have male friends and companions other than their husbands or relatives.

Throughout the region secret societies instilled in men and women ethical standards of personal behavior. The most important secret societies were the women's *Sande* and the men's *Poro*. They initiated boys and girls into adulthood. They also established standards for personal conduct, especially in regard to issues of gender, by emphasizing female virtue and male honor. Other secret societies influenced politics, trade, medical practice, recreation, and social gatherings.

Class and Slavery

Although many West Africans lived in stateless societies, most lived in hierarchically organized states headed by monarchs who claimed divine or semidivine status. These monarchs were far from absolute in the power they wielded, but they commanded armies, taxed commerce, and accumulated considerable wealth. Beneath the royalty were classes of landed nobles, warriors, peasants, and bureaucrats. Lower classes included blacksmiths, butchers, weavers, woodcarvers, tanners, and the oral historians called *griots*.

Slavery had been part of this hierarchical social structure since ancient times. Although it was very common throughout West Africa, slavery was less so in the forest region than on the savannah. It took a wide variety of forms and was not necessarily a permanent condition. Like people in other parts of the world, West Africans held war captives—including men, women, and children—to be without rights and suitable for enslavement. In Islamic regions, masters had obligations to their slaves similar to those of a guardian for a ward and were responsible for their slaves' religious well-being. In non-Islamic regions, the children of slaves acquired legal protections, such as the right not to be sold away from the land they occupied.

Slaves who served either in the royal courts of West African kingdoms or in the kingdoms' armies often exercised power over free people and could acquire property. Also, the slaves of peasant farmers often had standards of living similar to those of their masters. Slaves who worked under overseers in gangs on large estates were far less fortunate. However, even for such enslaved agricultural workers, the work and privileges accorded to the second and third generations became little different from those of free people. Regardless of their generation, slaves retained a low social status, but in many respects slavery in West African societies functioned as a means of assimilation.

► Recommended Readings

John Thornton. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1689*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. A thorough consideration of West African culture and its impact in the Americas.

John S. Mbiti. *An Introduction to African Religion*. London: Heinemann, 1975.

Religion

There were two religious traditions in fifteenth-century West Africa: Islamic and **indigenous**. Islam, which was introduced into West Africa by Arab traders and took root first in the Sudanese empires, was most prevalent in the more cosmopolitan savannah. Even there it was stronger in

cities than in rural areas. Islam was the religion of merchants and bureaucrats. It fostered literacy in Arabic, the spread of Islamic learning, and the construction of mosques in the cities of West Africa.

West Africa's indigenous religions remained strongest in the forest region. They were polytheistic and animistic, recognizing a great number of divinities and spirits. Beneath an all-powerful, but remote, creator god were lesser gods who represented the forces of nature. Other gods were associated with particular mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks. Indigenous West African religion saw the force of God in all things.

Practitioners of West African indigenous religions believed the spirits of their direct and remote ancestors could influence their lives. Therefore, ceremonies designed to sustain ancestral spirits and their power over the earth were a central part of traditional West African religions. These rituals were part of everyday life, making organized churches and professional clergy rare. Instead, family members assumed religious duties and encouraged their relatives to participate actively in ceremonies that involved music, dancing, and animal sacrifices in honor of deceased ancestors. Funerals were especially important because they symbolized the linkage between living and dead.

Art and Music

West African art was intimately related to religious practice. West Africans, seeking to preserve the images of their ancestors, excelled in woodcarving and sculpture in terra-cotta, bronze, and brass. Throughout the region, artists produced wooden masks representing in highly stylized manners ancestral spirits as well as various divinities. Wooden and terra-cotta figurines, sometimes referred to as “fetishes,” were also extremely common. West Africans used them in funerals, in rituals related to ancestral spirits, in medical practice, and in coming-of-age ceremonies.

West African music also served religion. Folk musicians employed such instruments as drums, xylophones, bells, flutes, and mbanzas (predecessor to the banjo) to produce a highly rhythmic accompaniment to the dancing that was an important part of religious rituals. A call-and-response style of singing also played a vital role in ritual. Vocal music style was characterized by polyphonic textures and sophisticated rhythms.

Literature: Oral Histories, Poetry, and Tales

West African literature was part of an oral tradition that passed from generation to generation. At its most formal, this was a literature developed by specially trained poets and musicians who served kings and nobles. But West African literature was also a folk art that expressed the views of the common people.

At a king's court there could be several poet-musicians who had high status and specialized in poems glorifying rulers and their ancestors by link-



This six-string wooden harp is a rare example of the type of instrument West African musicians and storytellers used to accompany themselves.

► Recommended Readings

- Werner Gillon. *A Short History of African Art*. New York: Viking, 1984.
- J. H. Kwabena Nketia. *The Music of Africa*. New York: Norton, 1974.

► Reading Check

West African social norms were recreated in the Americas. The emphasis on the importance of extended families is a good example of this phenomenon. Moreover, elements of West African culture survived to shape the unique culture of African Americans.

► Recommended Readings

Oyekan Owomoyela. *Yoruba Trickster Tales*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1977.

Ruth Finnegan. *Oral Literature in Africa*. 1970; reprint, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1976.

► Teaching Notes

In recent years, paleoanthropologists, archaeologists, and historians have revealed much about Africa's history and prehistory, but much remains to be learned concerning the past of this vast and diverse continent. The evolution of humans, the role of ancient Egypt in world history, and Egypt's relationship to Nubia and Kush are all topics that continue to attract wide interest.

Yet the history of African Americans begins in West Africa, the region from which the ancestors of most of them were unwillingly wrested. Historians have discovered, as subsequent chapters will show, that West Africans taken to America and their descendants in America were able to preserve much more of their ancestral way of life than scholars once believed possible. West African family organization, work habits, language structures and some words, religious beliefs, legends and stories, pottery styles, art, and music all made it to America. These African legacies, although often attenuated, influenced the way African Americans and other Americans lived in their new land and continue to shape American life.



Centuries-old rituals and traditions continue today in African life.

ing fact and fiction. Recitations of these poems were often accompanied by drums and horns. Court poets also used their trained memories to recall historical events and precise genealogies. The self-employed poets, called **griots**, who traveled from place to place were socially inferior to court poets, but they functioned in a similar manner. Both court poets and griots were men. It was in the genre of folk literature that women excelled. They joined men in the creation and performance of work songs and led in creating and singing dirges, lullabies, and satirical verses. Often these forms of literature used a call-and-response style similar to that of religious songs.

Just as significant for African-American history were the West African prose tales. Like similar stories told in other parts of Africa, these tales took two forms: those with human characters and those with animal characters who represented humans. The tales involving human characters dealt with such subjects as creation, the origins of death, paths to worldly success, and romantic love. Such tales often involved magic objects and potions.

The animal tales aimed both to entertain and to teach lessons. They focused on small creatures, often referred to as “trickster characters,” which are pitted against larger beasts. Among the heroes were the hare, the spider, and the mouse. Plots centered on the ability of these weak animals to outsmart larger and meaner antagonists, such as the snake, leopard, and hyena. In all instances, the animal characters had human emotions and goals.

In West Africa, these tales represented the ability of common people to counteract the power of kings and nobles. When the tales reached America, they became allegories for the struggle between enslaved African Americans and their powerful white masters.



Reading Check

How did the legacies of West African society and culture influence the way African Americans lived?