ration, commercial enterprise, or missionary activity. In fact, so great an advance has the study of Africa made that today it constitutes a distinct academic discipline offered in universities and colleges across the world.

**Review Questions**

1. What elements characterize the idea of history in precolonial Africa?
2. Examine the concept of Africa as a “dark continent.” What was the basis for this view?
3. Discuss the contribution of local chroniclers to the development of African historiography. In what ways did they differ from academic historians?
4. Explain the part played by the establishment of institutions of higher learning in historical writing in Africa.
5. What are the basic tenets of Afrocentrism as a paradigm for the historical study of Africa? Examine the criticisms of the theory.

**Additional Reading**


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**Chapter 2**

**The Geography of Africa**

**Introduction: Africans and the African Continent**

Africa is a vast and complex continent, and its peoples and landscapes are characterized by tremendous diversity. Africa is second only to Asia in size among the continents, and today it is home to over fifty nations, whose citizens speak over eight hundred languages. The physical geography of this huge continent has had a profound influence on its human history. This relationship between Africans and their ecological surroundings preceded all other historical and cultural developments, as it was on African soil that human history began. The natural environment continues to play a crucial role in the lives of the continent’s seven hundred million people, as the majority of the population earns a living directly off the land through farming or livestock herding. This chapter will describe Africa’s varied environments and will connect the natural history of the continent with the history of its peoples.

It is difficult to generalize about such a huge and varied region, but I will identify broad themes in Africa’s geography and African cultural developments by uniting ecological and historical analysis. The first section will describe Africa’s physical geography, focusing on the continent’s natural diversity, its extreme conditions, and the ecological challenges faced by its human inhabitants. The second section will analyze the diverse peoples of Africa, detailing their innovations and adaptations to the natural environment, and the related cultural differentiations. The final section will seek to establish an overview of the broad sweep of African history by analyzing the changing relationships between Africa’s people and their environment.3

One problem that underlies the study of Africa is the fact that many Americans and Europeans hold mistaken or ethnocentric views of Africa. Historians concerned primarily with Western civilizations have often ignored Africa, and when African history has been studied, it has frequently been misunderstood or viewed from a biased perspective. These misconceptions usually stem from cultural differences, ideas about race, and the legacy of the colonial era, and they extend to the geography of the continent. The consistent distortions in world maps,
which are one of the most basic elements of geography, are one example of the intrusive views of Africa. The traditional Mercator map, made by a sixteenth-century European and still popular, portrays the continents of the Northern Hemisphere as far larger than they actually are, relative to Africa, and South America. The accurate Peters Projection map shows the true size of Africa relative to the other continents which colonized it, and a direct comparison of the two maps indicates one of the ethnocentric views that continues to be passed on. The common perception that Africa really means sub-Saharan Black Africa is a second example of a way of thinking about African geography that is shaped by colonialism and ethnocentrism. Geographers and historians frequently categorize colonization and ethnocentrism. In this argument, Egypt and the Middle East are linked with Asia and Europe, and Africa's ancient dichotomies, connections to the Mediterranean world are denied. From a strictly geographical point of view, the idea that North Africa should be considered part of the Middle East is absurd, but the practice continues. A system of racial classifications underlies this idea, as the assertion that North Africa was part of the Middle East allowed Europeans to see Africa as the black continent, while the Middle East was home to the Africans. Africa is now home to people of all races, but the legacies of racial classifications and colonizer ideas persist.

North Africa as part of the Middle East rather than Africa, and when students are taught about ancient Egypt, this great culture is rarely presented as an African achievement. The argument traditionally made by European scholars is that the Sahara Desert cut the Mediterranean coast off from the rest of Africa, and that North Africa's cultural achievements have nothing to do with sub-Saharan Africa. In this argument, Egypt and the Middle East are linked with Asia and Europe, and Africa's ancient dichotomies, connections to the Mediterranean world are denied. From a strictly geographical point of view, the idea that North Africa should be considered part of the Middle East is absurd, but the practice continues. A system of racial classifications underlies this idea, as the assertion that North Africa was part of the Middle East allowed Europeans to see Africa as the black continent, while the Middle East was home to the Africans. Africa is now home to people of all races, but the legacies of racial classifications and colonizer ideas persist.

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All of these diverse ways of life, from foraging to urban life, continue to support today's Africans in various parts of the continent. The majority of Africans are farmers, growing food crops including sorghum, millet, yams, bananas, maize, and beans. However, livestock such as cattle, goats, and sheep are also part of the diet. The major food-producing areas are the drier savanna regions and the semiarid zones. All three of these lifestyles are primarily subsistence economies, supporting the family and household groups.

The Natural Environment: Diversity and Challenges

Landforms

In describing the physical geography of Africa, it is worthwhile to go back much farther than the evolution of our human ancestors in order to examine the geological creation of the continent. When all of the Earth's continental masses were once joined together in one super-continent they called Pangaea, the land mass that is now Africa was at the center of this single continent, and all the other continents broke away from Africa, which moved relatively little. The current configuration of the continents began 160 million years ago when the Americas and Australia split off, and South America soon followed. Africa, Europe, and Asia remained together the longest, which explains the sharp differences between the faunal species of the old world and new world continents. Africa's position at the center of this complex pattern of continental drift is the reason for many of the geological differences between Africa and other continents. Africa's land mass is primarily made up of a single tectonic plate, while continents such as Asia are the result of the fusion of several land masses, with the Himalayas providing evidence of the Indian sub-continent's collision with Asia. Africa has few mountain chains because its geological history did not involve such colliding tectonic plates, and Africa was subjected to less pressure. Unlike other continents, Africa is over-
Africa is a vast but remarkably uniform land mass. One result of the continent being essentially composed of a single plate of ancient rock is that it has a simple and well-defined coastline rather than the complex peninsulas, coasts, and bays of Europe, Asia, and North America. Africa also has a very even elevation, as the savannas that dominate the continent are located on broad, high plateaus, and little of Africa lies at sea level. The narrow continental shelf around Africa’s beaches drops off sharply into the ocean, and there is only a thin band of lowlands near the continent's shores. In moving inland from the African coast, one quickly leaves sea level and most ascends to elevations that average over five thousand feet across most of southern and eastern Africa. The fact that much of Africa is at the elevation of Denver, Colorado means that the temperatures are considerably cooler than in other tropical latitudes. The sharp drop in elevation from the interior to the coast also creates steep cliffs and the drainage patterns that characterize the routes most African rivers take to the sea.

Africa’s most prominent geological feature, in the absence of huge mountain ranges, is the Great Rift Valley. The rift valley, a four thousand-mile-long trench, is also a product of the continental drift process, but it was formed by the splitting of a crack in the continent rather than by collisions of tectonic plates. The Rift Valley is a massive crack in the African plateau, and it runs through Eastern Africa, is part of the continent’s trade, and it was created by the Red Sea. The Rift Valley stretches from Lake Turkana in Kenya running north to south. These lakes stretch from Lake Malawi in Tanzania, ending in Mozambique. However, the most important result of the rift system is not the string of lakes and deep valleys across the region, but the split between Africa and the Arabian peninsula. The Red Sea is another section of the rift system that was filled by water, and this divide is the most historically significant part of the Rift Valley. Heated debates surround the cultural, historical, and significant part of the Rift Valley. Geopolitical and political differences between Africa and the Middle East, but in terms of geographic and economic relationship between Africa and the Middle East, are at the root of the debate.

Other noteworthy aspects of Africa’s geography include several highland regions and a number of low-lying basins. Africa’s topography is shaped by uplift and the erosion of old mountains. These forces created both the mountains and the depressions that interrupt the continent’s broad plateau. The most significant mountain regions are the Ethiopian Highlands, the mountains of East Africa, and the high

veld areas of southern Africa. The highest peaks, Kilimanjaro, at over nineteen thousand feet, and Mount Kenya, at over seventeen thousand feet, are dormant volcanoes. All of these highland regions lie near the Rift Valley, and the volcanic activity is closely related to the Rift Valley pressures on the Earth's crust. The highland areas are of particular importance because their volcanic soils are the best in Africa, and their elevations create cooler and wetter weather patterns. By contrast, Africa's large basins are low-lying areas that experience hotter temperatures. Two of the depressions that interrupt the African plateaus, the Kalahari and Chad basins, are hot, arid regions, although many thousands of years ago, these basins were inland seas. The three other depressions, the Congo, Niger, and Nile basins, are river basins, and the rivers that drain these low areas have been important sites of early human civilizations.

Climate and Vegetation

Africa has a great natural diversity, and much of it is a result of the continent's climate patterns. Climate is a major factor in determining the natural vegetation and animals in each region, and it also controls the crops and livestock that people can successfully raise. Africa may be consistent in its coastline, elevation,
and geological composition, but its sheer enormity creates a wide variety of climates and vegetation types. The distance across Africa at its widest points from east to west is over five thousand miles, nearly twice the distance across the United States. A more meaningful measurement, however, is the 4,700-mile distance from the northern to the southern tip of Africa. The equator crosses the middle of Africa, but the huge continent extends well to the north and south of the tropical belt of the equator. No other landmass is so large and so wide. A range of latitudes creates climates that range from tropical at the equator to cold at the extreme ends of the continent.

There is a clear pattern to Africa’s climate, as it gets progressively drier as one moves away from the equator. Since the equator bisects the continent, this pattern creates a symmetry in which similar climate bands exist both north and south of the equator. Africa’s tropical rain forests are situated at the center of the warm, wet equatorial region. These forests gradually change to savanna woodlands and then savanna grasslands as greater distances from the equator result in drier conditions. The wide horizontal bands of savanna that surround the tropical regions are bordered to the north and south by concentric arcs of desert. These deserts are themselves bounded by the north and south by concentric arcs of semidesert, which in turn are bounded by the north and south by concentric arcs of steppe. Like the shift from forest to savanna, this vegetation change is gradual, as areas. The dry savanna areas eventually become too arid to support grasses. These climate belts or bands continue to form mirrored pairs, as the semidesert and desert regions, as the desert and steppes regions that cut across southern Africa. True deserts are the next climate bands, with the Sahara Desert occupying the corresponding latitude at the continent’s narrowest point.

South Africa is the smallest country in Southern Africa, with the Kalahari and the Namib Desert in the northern part of the country. At the extreme tips of the continent, the pattern of constantly drier climates ends, and the areas furthest from the equator have cooler temperatures. The temperate climates of South Africa’s Mediterranean coast and of coastal South Africa are termed “Mediterranean,” and these regions share the warm, dry summers and mild, moist winters of Italy and Greece.

The key to Africa’s climate is rain. This crucial moisture is primarily dependent on latitude, but precipitation is also affected by elevation and the seasons. Africa’s elevation is relatively low, and precipitation is generally quite steady, as is the average flow of rainfall. Rainfall is greater than 1,000 mm in the highlands and basins of West Africa and is normally less than 1,000 mm in the low-lying coastal areas. Rainfall is also more important as they rain forests to their elevation. The seasons are even more important. Rainfall affects rainfall in the region. The seasons do not vary dramatically from January to July in tropical areas, but much of Africa experiences clearly defined cycles of rainy and dry seasons. Savanna regions can look completely different when the rains fail to come to semidesert or desert regions. When this occurs, the rains fail to come to semidesert or desert regions. When this occurs, the rains fail to come.

Figure 2.3. African Climates

and by some definitions, two-thirds of the continent is semiarid or arid. In the tropical rain forests, however, rainfall can be a problem due to its excess rather than its scarcity. Monsoon-like floods can seriously erode the soil and wash away its nutrients.

Water and Aridity

The availability of fresh water is the predominant ecological problem for Africa and Africans. Rainfall and climate fluctuations are crucial concerns, and this problem is exacerbated by the uneven distribution of large bodies of fresh

water across the continent. Rain is a vital source of water for crops, livestock, and human consumption, but water can also be obtained from lakes and rivers. The Nile Valley, for example, has been a fertile agricultural region for thousands of years. Egyptians have relied on the Nile to bring water from East Africa’s highlands. The Nile is a unique case, however, as most arid and semi-arid regions in Africa lack significant rivers and lakes, in addition to receiving little rain.17

Africa does possess a number of enormous lakes and rivers, but the majority of these potentially life-sustaining sources of water are in the minority of regions that already get sufficient rain. This uneven distribution of large bodies of water adds to Africa’s problems with aridity and its geographic diversity. All of these regions are in the temperate highland regions of East Africa. Many of these lakes are remarkably large, and their waters are important to the people who live near them. For example, Lake Tanganyika, at 7,670 square miles, is the world’s second largest freshwater lake. It is home to an incredible diversity of fish and other aquatic life. Lakes such as these provide an important source of food and income for the millions of people who live along their shores.

The Great Lakes region and the Ethiopian Highlands are the sources of the Blue and White Nile branches. The Nile is a geographic wonder, traveling more than 4,000 miles from its highland sources to enrich a desert landscape. The Congo and Niger Rivers, however, are more distant and provide less water to the region. The Congo and Niger Rivers are vital to the people who live along their banks, providing essential sources of water and transportation. These rivers are also important for their ability to create ecosystems that support a diverse range of plant and animal life.

The Nile flows through a series of reservoirs, including the Aswan High Dam, which has significantly altered the flow of water and affected the lives of millions of people in the region. These changes have had both positive and negative effects, with many people benefiting from increased irrigation and hydroelectric power, while others have faced displacement and loss of traditional ways of life.

The Geography of Africa

Other Ecological Challenges

Africa’s diverse climates and harsh natural conditions make the continent a challenging and unpredictable environment. With its extremes of scarcity and exuberance, Africa often seems like an environment that is hostile to human life. Rains are few and far between, and the soil is often as hard as iron, while rain forest areas can experience floods that can cause significant damage to crops, infrastructure, and human lives. The continent is home to some of the most remote and difficult landscapes, making it difficult for people to access essential resources and services.

The combination of unreliable water supplies and damaged soils forces many Africans to adopt nomadic lifestyles, creating new patterns of clearings and fallow land. Low levels of rain and poor soils in semi-arid regions lead many livestock breeders to develop nomadic movements. These pastoralists travel with their cattle in search of adequate grazing, echoing the cyclical migrations of the large wildlife birds of zebra and wildebeest on the Serengeti plains of East Africa. In rain forest areas, large sandstorms occur regularly. The Sahara is equal in area to the United States, and its rugged landscape includes mountains and stone deserts as well as the more familiar sand dunes.20

These African deserts are the most extreme examples of the continent’s uneven distribution of water. Their enormous size renders vast expanses of the continent unproductive, but this is not the only concern. Nothing about geography or ecology is completely static, and climate and landscapes constantly change, even though the alterations may only be visible over long periods of time. For example, research into historical climate cycles reveals that large parts of the Sahara were green savanna ten thousand years ago, which explains the cave paintings of lakes, fish, elephants, and hippopotamuses found in desert regions. Unfortunately, it is clear that the Sahara Desert is expanding today rather than returning to this greener state, and this expansion has already had devastating effects. Desertification, or the spread of desert-like conditions, is occurring in several African regions, but particularly in the sahel areas south of the Sahara. Desertification can be caused by climate changes or human actions such as erosion due to overgrazing. Research into Africa’s climate over the past several decades suggests that the continent is getting warmer and drier. This warming trend may be related to the greenhouse effect or to natural cycles, but in either case it is a tremendous problem.21


est regions, rain's leaching of nutrients from the soil means that farmland only lasts for a few years, and then new forest areas must be cleared to replace the exhausted soil. Barriers such as deserts complicate the movements of pastoralists and farmers, especially since the Sahara stretches across the entire continent. Nomadic groups often inhabit the borders of Africa's climate and vegetation zones, with many people living on the margins of productive land, hoping that the rains will not fail.

Africa also faces a separate set of ecological challenges that are not related to the central problems of water, aridity, and poor soil. In addition to being an unpredictable and challenging landscape in terms of climate, the African landscape is also home to a variety of debilitating diseases. The emerging field of environmental history, which combines human and biological history, has revealed the profound impact that diseases and micro-organisms can have on human populations. Certain insects can also bring plagues to the land, and locusts are a serious problem in North Africa and the Horn.

The dominant influence on the African landscape has been the human population. Diseases are more common in the central parts of the continent than in the Horn, and West and Central Africa's population is highest in tropical regions with high rainfall, but deserts have lower human populations. These coastal regions are perfect sites in which micro-organisms can thrive. These coastal areas are home to a variety of debilitating diseases. The emerging field of environmental history, which combines human and biological history, has revealed the profound impact that diseases and micro-organisms can have on human populations. Certain insects can also bring plagues to the land, and locusts are a serious problem in North Africa and the Horn.

Malaria is a problem across the width of Africa, and sleeping sickness, which is a chronic disease for many Africans, is a disease that affects people in forest regions, and it too can render large areas unlivable due to its high mortality rate. Rinderpest, a related respiratory disease that attacks cattle, is a major threat to livestock. All these diseases limit the productivity of African peoples, and better health care, as well as improved sanitation systems, are needed to reduce the adverse impacts of these diseases on water, sanitation, and hygiene systems.

Africa's history is marked by the emergence of new political entities, particularly in the Horn of Africa, where the Horn of Africa has emerged as a significant political and economic force in recent years. The Horn of Africa has been a region of conflict and cooperation, with countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti all sharing a common interest in the exploitation of natural resources, particularly oil and gas.

The People of Africa: Innovation and Adaptation

The diverse and challenging geography of Africa has shaped the human species that first evolved on that continent in very significant ways. All of humanity shares a common genetic identity that was formed on African soil, so the earliest adaptations of our prehistoric ancestors are a part of all human beings. Many of the most crucial adaptations and innovations in human history were responses made to Africa's environmental conditions. Our earliest ancestors faced severe challenges on the African landscape several million years ago, particularly from predators such as lions, leopards, and hyenas. These predators were faster, stronger, and better equipped to kill, but the early hominids evolved in unique ways to meet these challenges. Bipedal locomotion freed the forelimbs for carrying objects and eventually for the use of tools and fire, while the need for group cooperation led to the critical developments of language and culture.

Africa's prehistory and the story of human evolution will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, but it is important to understand the links between Africa's geography and early human history. Scientists believe that the earliest hominids originated in eastern Africa, splitting off from apes and chimpanzees perhaps as late as five million years ago. Archaeologists have studied two to four million years of prehistoric life in eastern African sites ranging from Ethiopia to South Africa. The greatest concentration of remains comes from present-day Kenya and Tanzania, and a number of experts have suggested that the ecologically diverse geography of the East African Rift Valley region was a stimulus for the evolution of new species. These early foragers and scavengers needed to be near sources of water, and the region is filled with lakes, which also contained fish and attracted wildlife. The broad savannas encouraged bipedal movement, allowing upright movement to be an advantage for early hominids to see farther and travel more quickly. A wide variety of plants, fish, and animal foods were also available in the extremely varied region of savannas, mountain rain forests, and lakes.

Other hominoids classified within the genus Homo overlapped with the australopithecines in the rich East African environment that has been called the cradle of humanity. Homo habilis and the later and more successful Homo erectus appear to have also originally inhabited this Rift Valley region beginning roughly two million years ago. The increased intelligence linked to the larger brain of Homo erectus was probably the key to making possible the expansion of the human geographic range beyond eastern Africa. Homo erectus was able to move northward into North Africa and Europe and eastward into Asia, in part because the Sahara was significantly greener than it is today, and the Nile offered a route to the Mediterranean and the Arabian peninsula even in dry periods. The dates of these movements are still uncertain, as is the transition from Homo erectus to Homo sapiens.
Figure 2-4. A Good Train on the Side of the Rift Valley in Kenya

Homo sapiens, but scientists are in agreement that eastern Africa was the site of the birth of humanity and the beginnings of human culture.28

Birthplace of Civilization

Africa was also the site of the world’s first great civilization, but a huge span of time came between the adaptations of Rift Valley hominids and the civilization of Egypt. During the million-year period commonly called the Stone Age, the diverse environments of the African continent were slowly populated. Stone tools are the best sources of information that archaeologists have about the gradual evolution of human culture during this time span. Old Stone Age sites can be found from Africa’s Mediterranean coast to the Cape of Good Hope, but they are clustered around water sources in savanna and open woodland areas. Hunting and tool-making techniques improved slowly through the Middle Stone Age, and by the Late Stone Age, human economies were increasingly specialized to specific ecological conditions. Humankind gradually adapted to mountain, woodland, and desert-edge environments, and learned to fish and to exploit specific wild plants and animals.29

The next great leap in human evolution and environmental adaptation was the domestication of plants and animals. Fishing may well have brought communities together into fixed sites earlier than farming, but agriculture truly transformed human culture. The agricultural revolution led to significantly higher population densities and greater cultural development, but it was a gradual process. Most experts believe that agriculture developed first in southwestern Asia, and spread to northern Africa by cultural diffusion. Clear evidence of farming has been found near the Nile in Egypt from approximately seven thousand years ago, and in Ethiopia from about five thousand years ago. Wheat and barley were cultivated at the early Egyptian sites, which also had domesticated animals including cattle, sheep, and goats. These crops and livestock were the same species as those used in southwestern Asia, but Africans soon began domesticating indigenous plants and animals. The earliest Ethiopian sites were settings for the domestication of finger miller and teff, grains which are still important in Africa, and northern Africans also domesticated indigenous African cattle.30

Agriculture led to population increases, larger sedentary settlements, and the need for more organized cultural institutions. The achievements of the ancient Egyptians are the world’s greatest example of the impact of agriculture on human society. Egypt’s Nile Valley communities were unified approximately five thousand years ago, and the rule of the pharaohs lasted an incredible three thousand years. The stability and wealth of the Egyptian dynasties depended on the water and fertile silt of the Nile River, and the great monuments of this society are still standing, preserved by their solidity and the arid climate. Egyptians learned to control the Nile’s annual floods, and their irrigation systems enabled them to harvest multiple crops. Egypt’s cultural achievements were stunning, as the society’s cities, economy, religion, government, and arts reached remarkable heights.31

Egypt was uniquely blessed with the Nile River, but similar cultural developments soon followed on a smaller scale in other regions. Complex civilizations such as Aksum and Kush emerged in Nubia, closer to the sources of the Nile. Agriculture and sophisticated societies also developed in West Africa, where yam, bulrush, millet, and local rice and yams were first domesticated. River valleys were again crucial, as the Senegal and Niger Rivers in particular supplied the settings for large agricultural communities. The combination of agriculture and trade eventually led to the Nok, Ghana, Mali, and Songhai civilizations of West Africa. Egypt and all of these other early African kingdoms will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters, but it is important to note their common themes of river valley agriculture and ecological adaptation.32

Hunters, Pastoralists, and Farmers

The domestication of plants and animals revolutionized human culture, but many regions of Africa never developed the complex urban civilizations that were built primarily upon the base of irrigated agriculture in river valleys. The majority of the African continent simply does not possess sufficient water or fertile soil to support such societies. Africans have always had to adapt to the limits of their local environments, and in most regions less-centralized societies were the norm.

Following the agricultural transformation, three major ways of adapting to the land were available to Africans. Livestock herding and farming were added to the original human economy of hunting and gathering. Hunting, herding, and farming have different ways of life, but each can sustain human life in Africa. Most Africans are thus primary producers, as they depend on the food they produce or gather for survival.13

The geography of a given region does not completely dictate what economic system can be used there, but environmental factors do limit the choices available. For example, a wooded savanna region could probably support foragers, pastoralists, or farmers, although crops such as bananas or rice would fail. However, solid generalizations can be made about the way of life in each region based on geological cohesion. As the African continent has become more populated, and particularly so the last several centuries, farmers have pushed other groups off land that could be farmed, and pastoralists have moved into increasingly arid regions. Hunter/gatherer societies have fared far the worst, as the pressures have left them with only the most marginal land. Africa’s deserts and rain forests are the regions with the lowest population densities. The Sahara is home to some nomadic camel herdsmen, and its oases help make human life possible, while the Sahel is home to pastoralists. The fact that these extreme regions are inhabited at all reveals a more resilient and adaptable nature.

Diverse Peoples

Up to this point, we have placed Africans in three broad groups according to their primary method of earning a living from the land. This is a useful approach, but more exact in cataloging the diversity of African peoples, more detailed classifications are needed. Over the past several centuries, many Western scholars have attempted to categorize the peoples of the world based on physical appearance. Such racial classifications are being rejected, along with the long-held idea of a Hamitic racial group of Africa. This Hamitic group was the ethnocentric creation of Europeans who believed that a white, non-African group must have brought civilization to Africa, but there is no basis for this theory. Most African scholars today now use language and ethnicity as the criteria with which to group peoples of the African continent instead of outdated and inaccurate racial concepts.14


Africa, already noted for its geographic diversity, also contains great linguistic diversity, with all four language families represented there.17

Language forms an important part of ethnicity, which is the primary way in which Africans establish their own group identities. An ethnic group is usually understood to be a set of people who share a common language, culture, and territory. Africa's hundreds of ethnic groups were often called "tribes" during colonial times, and the label persists, but it has derogatory connotations and is inappropriate. Many ethnic groups are known by the name of their language, but specific cultural and religious traditions and a sense of a shared homeland are also important components of ethnic identity. Ethnicity can be very complex, as the Swahili people of the East African coast base their identity in part on their historic links with Arab states and Islam, but also on their African cultural and religious heritage and their maritime way of life. The predominant way in which an ethnic group earns a living can be a crucial element in ethnicity, as herding cattle is at the very heart of the Maasai identity. However, if a Maasai family takes up farming, their ethnic identity often shifts from Maasai to Arusha, and if they become hunters, they are known as Dorobo. Anthropologists and historians have only recently come to understand how ethnicity can be a fluid or flexible construction, as the shift from Maasai to Arusha or Dorobo demonstrates. Many Africans speak several languages, and maintain economic and marriage ties with other ethnic groups. In general, Africans have an inclusive rather than exclusive concept of identity, and it is not uncommon to shift ethnic identity if circumstances require such a change.18

Migrations

It is thus possible to "move" between ethnic groups, but an even more remarkable tradition of movement has occurred in the many migrations of peoples across the continent. Africa is the cradle of human civilization, but many areas have only been settled in the last few centuries, due to the ecological challenges and the relatively low population densities of the continent. Africa has a tradition of great migrations, and both the nomadic movements of herders and hunters and the inevitable expansion of farmers due to population growth and soil exhaustion have supported this ongoing dynamic. Successful migrations of people into new regions of the continent represent another adaptation to the natural environment and are also major causes of cultural diffusion.

The most important of Africa's population movements was the expansion of the speakers of Bantu languages from West Africa across most of eastern and southern Africa. The Bantu-speakers followed river valleys through Central Africa's rain forests, and the rift Valley formed a corridor for them across eastern and southern Africa's savannas. They began this expansion about two thousand years ago and it was completed in just a few centuries, but these rapid migrations should not be understood as organized military marches or conquests. One later

Africa's Environmental History: Balancing Africa's People and Ecology

Ancient and Modern Trade

The first two sections of this chapter have described the African continent and the diverse African societies that have resulted from human adaptations to these challenging ecological conditions. The final section of this investigation into the geography of Africa's people examines the geography of Africa's nature and the ecological relationships between African societies and their environment. Africa's environmental history has been extensively modified and complex, and this history has had a significant impact on the human development of Africa and its people. Africa's history has been shaped by the interaction of the continent's natural resources and human activities, and these interactions continue to shape the present-day realities of African society.

Colonial Africa

The entire colonial history of Africa was defined by these same exploitative economic systems in which outsiders gained control of Africa's peoples and natural resources. European nations occupied African regions and restructured the relationships between African peoples and their natural environment. These economic systems were driven by the pursuit of wealth and power, and they had profound and lasting effects on African societies and economies.

The slave trade, carried out in order to supply Europe's American colonies with cheap labor, destroyed existing systems of international trade in Africa. The slave trade, carried out in order to supply Europe's American colonies with cheap labor, destroyed existing systems of international trade in Africa.

The African continent was stripped of millions of potentially productive people, and the goods received in exchange were usually guns, alcohol, and cheap goods. These goods were manufactured goods. None of the European products were of significant value, in this trade. These goods were manufactured goods. None of the European products were of significant value, in this trade.

Some African societies, the best way to maintain power amidst the conflicts. For some African societies, the best way to maintain power amidst the conflicts, the best way to maintain power amidst the conflicts.

After the trans-Atlantic slave trade ended in the mid-nineteenth century, European colonial powers began occupying extensive regions of Africa. At first, these colonial powers began occupying extensive regions of Africa. At first, these colonial powers began occupying extensive regions of Africa.

The geographic boundaries of many African states were drawn by European powers as a result of this scramble for Africa. These artificial boundaries are one of the most and the most problematic problems for independent African states. These artificial boundaries are one of the most problematic problems for independent African states. These artificial boundaries are one of the most problematic problems for independent African states.

Some of the commodities that Europeans sought, such as gold, had long been important in the African trade patterns, but other products were new and altered the economies. They used force when they met resistance, and they did not seek balanced their use of the natural environment or to meet the interests of the African population. European nations required Africans in cool Highland locations to begin harvesting cocoa, coffee, and tea, often demanding that all the best agricultural areas be used for these luxury export crops. Rubber and palm oil became important raw materials for European industry, and these products also served as key commodities for food production. Forest landscapes were dramatically changed, as rubber plantations, hardwood timber harvesting, and agricultural clearing all increased rapidly. Europeans desired ivory and relished the adventure of hunting African game to such an extent that they greatly reduced wildlife populations, and societies that depended on hunting suffered.

Independent Africa

African nations began winning their independence from colonial rule in the 1950s, and this process continued across four decades, culminating in the fall of South Africa's apartheid system in the 1990s. The independent nations are still in their infancy, but it is important to understand how the relationships between African and the natural environment have changed with this critical political shift. Unfortunately, an examination of the economies of different African regions suggests that African people have not yet been able to gain control of Africa's natural resources and end the exploitation of their continent by outsiders. Ecological relationships have not remained static, but important colonial patterns persist. As luxury crops such as coffee, tea, and cocoa are still grown for export on much of the continent's best farmland. The beneficiaries of Africa's natural and human resources are no longer European kings, but international corporations and small African elites have assumed a similar role. The wealth from South Africa's gold and diamond mines, Nigeria's oil wells, and Congo's copper mines has flowed out of Africa, enriching American, European, and White South African corporations and their investors. These neo-colonial systems have al-
of the continent, and little success has been achieved in government efforts to shift this subsistence way of life into a system of commercial ranching. Cattle herders, like hunting and gathering societies, are far removed from the international economy, but many other Africans are involved in export production. Extractive industries such as mining, forestry, petroleum drilling, and palm oil and rubber production provide important jobs, but also show that Africa's economic role is still the production of raw materials for export to more industrialized continents. Movement from rural to urban areas is a common population trend in independent African nations, but many of these migrants are disappointed in their search for jobs.48

African's economic and ecological problems are very serious and difficult to solve. Some progress has been made in important areas like food production, but the continent's rapid population growth virtually ensures that feeding all of Africa's people will continue to be a struggle. The era of the slave trade and of European colonialism have left a long-lasting legacy in Africa. The last century has seen rapid and sustained economic development in most regions of the world, but Africa has not shared equally in these industrial and technological advances. The African continent holds significant natural wealth, including petroleum, uranium, gold, diamonds, copper, and waterfalls that represent a large share of the world's undeveloped hydroelectric power resources. Despite these valuable energy and mineral reserves, Africa remains caught in complex cycles of debt and dependence. Many African nations lack the capital to develop these resources or to undertake major irrigation and transportation projects without outside investment or foreign aid. Researchers use the term "underdevelopment" to describe Africa's economic problems, and they link Africa's underdevelopment directly to the long history of outsiders exploiting the continent solely for its raw materials.49

The Future of Africa

An understanding of the geography and ecological history of the African continent must be at the center of efforts to improve Africa's future. The people of young Africa: nations need to regain control of the continent's natural and human resources so that this wealth can be used for the benefit of Africans. Outside have exploited Africa during the long periods of the slave trade and colonial occupation, but these patterns must be gradually reversed now that Africa is independent. Changing the relationships between Africans and their environment will not be easy, and many recent efforts have done as much harm as good. The African landscape has been altered and damaged by human abuse, with desertification being perhaps the most serious problem, and it takes time for the environment to recover. Many Africans have been forced on to marginal lands by popula-

The Geography of Africa

Efforts by non-Africans to solve the continent's development problems have usually failed, and it appears that it is time for African solutions. There are several elements within the African cultural heritage that suggest hope for success. Africa has undergone ecological and social decline while the belief systems of colonial powers determined the relationships between people and the land, but these exploitative, ascensional beliefs can be rejected. Africans can achieve greater unity, peace, and stability if they move away from the competitive Western ideologies of racism and nationalism, and return to the more fluid and inclusive African concepts of ethnicity and group identity. Africans need unity and balance with the environment as much as unity between peoples, and there are also cultural traditions that support this goal. Religious and cultural beliefs across the African continent share the concept that humans and religious spirits are not separate from the land. This holistic approach to the relationship between people and the environment is very different from the Western ethos that supports maximizing environmental exploitation. The African belief in the unity of humans and the environment can be a cornerstone in developing economic and ecological practices that are sustainable and are for the benefit of Africans. Regaining a balanced relationship between Africans and the African continent is a great challenge, but the peoples of Africa have shown their ability to adapt time and time again.34

Review Questions

1. In what ways does the geological history of the African continent's formation continue to shape life in Africa? What role has the Great Rift Valley played in African history?
2. Why is Africa less densely populated than Europe and the United States? In light of Africa's population growth, do you expect that this will still be true in the future?
3. What geographical conditions promoted or discouraged the development of early civilizations? What was the role of trade routes in these early societies?
4. How is ethnicity related to geography and to economic methods such as mixing, borrowing, and farming? In what ways is ethnicity likely to change amidst modern Africa's urban migration trends?
5. How would acceleration of current trends in Africa's changing climate affect Africa? To what extent could technology improve on Africa's uneven distribution of water?
6. How do Africa's landforms and climate affect economic development today? What natural resources might independent Africa exploit more profitably?

33. Bennett and Coates, Environment and History, 72-90; Mzumla, The African, 39