General World Cultures

Chapter 11- West Africa

**sub-Saharan**- the region of Africa south of the Sahara

**Sahel**- a strip of grassland along the southern edge of the Sahara

**savanna**- a grassland region near the tropics

**animism**- a belief that many spirits live within the natural world

**ritual**- an activity that has a sacred meaning and is part of the practice of a religion

**invader**- an outsider who comes into an area to conquer or destroy it

**mosque**- an Islamic place of worship

**proverb**- a short saying that expresses the values or morals of a culture

**A Look at Sub-Saharan Africa**

\* Along the northern edge of Africa is a desert called the Sahara, which stretches from east to west across the whole continent. The Sahara is the world’s largest desert. It divides Africa into a northern strip and a large southern part called **sub-Saharan** Africa, or the region of Africa south of the Sahara. Here are some desert facts. <http://www.sciencekids.co.nz/sciencefacts/earth/desert.html>

\* Along the southern edge of the Sahara is an area called the **Sahel**. Short grass covers the ground. There are few, if any trees. The land farther south is called **savanna**, which has tall grass and is dotted with trees.

\* In West Africa, the land is low and flat. The Niger River makes a big curve through the region. Near the coast, rain forest covers much of the land. The climate is hot and moist. In some areas of the rain forest, the trees are 200 feet tall. In other areas, farmers and loggers have cleared many of the trees. There are fewer and fewer untouched areas of the forest.

\* In the past, farmers in the rain forest and in the less humid forests would clear the land by burning. Do you think this is good for the land? Defend your answer.

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This technique is called slash-and-burn agriculture. They would plant crops for a few years until the land wore out, and then they would move on. Those who raised cattle would burn forest and wait for the grass to grow for their cattle. After centuries of this, much of the original forest is a patchwork of farmland, grassland, abandoned farmland, and some old-growth forest.

**The Ancient Heritage of West Africa**

\* Thousands of years ago, people who were the ancestors of today’s West Africans settled along the Niger and Senegal rivers. They live in scattered villages, each of which was made up of one extended family. Families were linked together as clans, and several clans made up one large ethnic group. The clan remains the basic social structure in West Africa today, especially in rural areas.

\* Religion was important to the West Africans. They believed that spirits lived in things, such as rocks and rivers, as well as in plants, animals, and people. Religious beliefs of this type are sometimes called **animism**. A religious **ritual**- including prayers, songs, and dances- was meant to influence the spirits. Even today, most West Africans, no matter which other faith they practice, still believe in animism.

**The Kingdom of Ghana**

\* Around A.D. 300, a kingdom called Ghana formed in West Africa. It took shape between the Niger River and the Sahara. The first rulers came from the north. They were driven out around A.D. 700, and a local group called the Soninke took power. Under the Soninke, Ghana began its rise.

\* The Soninke used iron and gold, two important metals. The iron was used for weapons that helped them conquer other groups. The gold was obtained by trading. Would you trust someone with expensive items without ever seeing them?

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Believe it or not, these people would leave their valuables near the water and when they returned, piles of gold replaced the goods. This helped Ghana become wealthy.

\* What would you trade for gold? If you had gold, what would you want in return?

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\* The gold of Ghana drew traders from the north, who came across the Sahara on camels. The West Africans had no salt, and these traders brought salt to exchange for gold. They also brought a new religion, Islam. Many of the people became Muslim, or believers in Islam.

**The Kingdoms of Mali and Songhai**

\* In the 1200s, Ghana fell to **invaders.** In its place rose Mali, an even greater empire. The capital was named Timbuktu. By the 1400s, a rival nation named the Songhai toppled them. They, too were Muslims, and kept Timbuktu a major city. This kingdom lasted 150 years but fell to invaders- and a golden age came to and end in West Africa.

\* **Mosques** are common sights in West Africa. They wear clothes that keep the whole body covered (almost) and many keep their heads covered as well. This is all part of the rules of the Islam (Muslim) religion.

\* Men and women wear long gowns made of dyed cotton, with rich and bright colors and with bold striped or patterns.

**The Slave Trade**

\* No records tell exactly how many Africans were enslaved. Some people think the number may be as high as 20 million! The slave trade was connected to events on the other side of the world. Europeans were colonizing the Americas and building plantations there. They brought enslaved people from Africa to do the work, as they knew African people were good farmers. Their skills would make the plantations prosper.

\* By the 1700s, 60,000 Africans were being captured and sold every year. Over 2 million of the slaves captured dies on their journey to America. Slave trade damaged Africa deeply. It caused kingdoms to fall, destroyed cities, and shattered clans and families. Slave traders often paid with guns. This made the African ethnic groups that sold people into slavery powerful and wealthy. Even though they were settled, some Africans gave up farming and began making their living by becoming slave traders. Others gave up farming to save their lives- and became nomads, running from slavery.

**Modern Nigeria**

\* Nigeria is the most powerful country in West Africa. Over 100 million people live there- more than 10% of Africa’s entire population.

\* The Nigerians are divided, however, into more than 200 ethnic groups. The four main ones are the Hausa, the Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Ibo. These four groups make up more than half the population. These groups have a history of disagreements and tension.

\* Since then, Nigeria has experienced ups and downs. They have oil. It is the source of much of the oil that the U.S. buys. The money from the sale of oil brought rapid changes to Nigeria. People are flowing into cities at a large rate. Lagos, the capital, has become a center of industry and trade. Factories in Lagos make such products as cloth and soap, and some put together car parts imported from abroad. In the 1980s, oil prices dropped- and all of Nigeria felt the jolt. Dependence on oil can be a mixed blessing, and some in Nigeria wonder whether it may be depending too much on oil. Do you think that it is ok to depend on someone or something too much?

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Is there someone or something in life that you depend on? Tell us about that.

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**Traditions in West Africa**

\* Many West Africans feel strong ties to their own ethnic group. In Nigeria, for example, some people think of themselves as “Ibo” or “Yoruba” first. Only after that are they “Nigerian.” Within the ethnic group, their loyalty is to their clan.

\* Clans can be very large in West Africa. A single Ibo clan, for example, may have as many as half a million people. Such a large clan has members who live in many different villages. Members gather from time to time for lively celebrations.

Most West African ethnic groups have unique customs. The Ewe of Ghana, for example, use drums as musical instruments and for sending messages. Strings stretched across a drum change its sound when played. Each sound has a meaning.

**West African Folk Tales**

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| \* West African cultures are well known for their storytelling and poetry. In the time of slavery, West Africans brought their tradition of storytelling to the Americas. Versions of their stories survive today. Last year, we read a tale about Anansi the spider.\* The Yoruba are well known for their **proverbs**, or short sayings expressing the values or morals of a culture. Riddles are popular among the Yoruba, too. Most riddles are meant to entertain or get people to think.\* The storytelling goes back to the time of the ancient kingdoms of West Africa. In those days, the West Africans did not have written languages, and storytelling was a way of keeping records. *Complete the Geography in Your Life Understanding Time Zones on page 157.* Find…this version incomplete. The Tortoise and the ElephantThere was a great King who ruled in the village of Gbogan a long long time ago at a time when animals could talk. The King took very ill for a long period of time and was at the point of death. After several attempts by medicine men from within the kingdom to heal the king failed, “Ikumejakako”, the dreaded herbalist who dwelt in the evil forest was consulted. He examining the king and pronounced that the king would have to take a special brew made of elephant body parts or die within seven days.   The King and his chiefs wondered how they would capture a big and dangerous animal like an elephant. The king after consultation with his chiefs made an announcement throughout the kingdom that anyone who would capture an elephant within seven days would get half of the kingdom and his beautiful daughter as a bride.   The tortoise came forward to accept the challenge. He made a request of the King, that a very deep pit be dug and that the pit should be concealed with raffia and mats and that a throne fit for a king should be set on top of the pit. The tortoise made some “akara” balls (bean cakes) and set out into the forest in search of an elephant. The wandered through the forest making enquiries of his fellow animals until the third day when he stumbled on an elephant resting under a tree…….  Tortoise: Elephant, what are you doing here…haven’t you heard the news?  Elephant: What news? Do not disturb my siesta tortoise, I do not like gossip Tortoise: I don’t believe my eyes, a whole King, resting in the forest under a shade!!  Elephant: A King, what King?  Tortoise: YOU!! The king is dead and the elders have decided to make you king over the people.  Elephant: (roars with laughter)….you must be a joker tortoise, who would want to make an old ugly elephant like me a king?  Tortoise: There is no time for explanations, preparations are already at an advanced stage in the kingdom for your coronation, we must make haste, see, I have proof (he brought out one of the “akara” balls and handed one over to the elephant) This akara is only a small part of the delicacies being prepared for your coronation.  Elephant: (putting the akara into his mouth) Hmmmmm….this is delicious…really delicious it must be true, lets make haste.   And so the tortoise led the elephant all the way to the village handing out the akara balls to him at intervals and singing popular coronation songs to him all the way.   As the tortoise and the elephant approached the palace, news of the capture of the elephant spread like wild fire, everybody came out of their houses and started following the duo to the palace joyous and joining in tortoise’s songs. This all created an atmosphere of festivities reinforcing theongs. This all created an atmosphere of festivities reinforcing the in the elephant’s mind that he was to be made king.   Elephant: Your story must be true…the people are really joyous to see me.  Tortoise: You know I wouldn’t lie to you, can’t you see them singing that your reign shall be long?   As the throne finally came into sight, the elephant lumbered into it majestically amidst dancing and singing. He sat on the throne and instantly the ground gave way beneath him and he fell into the pit. The king’s warriors immediately descended upon him with spears and clubs and butchered him. Once the king had taken a sip of the elephant broth made for him, he became instantly well and fulfilled his promise towards the tortoise. |  |