



THE RACE AGAINST TIME

TOPIC II:

KINGDOMS OF AFRICA

To prepare for this topic, please watch the following videos and read this document.

BBC Series Kingdoms of Africa- Nubia - <https://youtu.be/EasSs1VED8w>

BBC Series Kingdom of Africa- West Africa - <https://youtu.be/BNYfCaRIMy0>

BBC Series Kingdom of Africa- Great Zimbabwe - <https://youtu.be/OTVShn1vKV0> (Competitors will be tested on this video during Nationals Tournament only, not Regionals)

The following manuscript has been taken from PBS.org. Credits can be found at http://www.pbs.org/wonders/fr_wb.htm

Part I.

The Rediscovery of Ancient Nubia

In the 1820s, the Western world was thrilled to hear news of the rediscovery of the monuments of ancient Nubia - or "Kush," as it was called in the Bible. The ruins, hundreds of miles south of Egypt in the Sudan, had been reported almost simultaneously by individual British, French, and American travellers, whose excited descriptions and glorious illustrations of temples and pyramid fields delighted scholars and reawakened interest in this mysterious African kingdom.

Greek traditions told of Memnon, a legendary Nubian king who had fought in the Trojan War; they spoke of Nubia's people, who were the "tallest and handsomest on earth," and whose piety was so great that the gods preferred their offerings to those of all other men. They also knew that historical Nubian kings had once conquered Egypt and ruled it for sixty years and that their dynasty was counted as Egypt's Twenty-fifth. The Greeks, however, did not call these people "Nubians" or "Kushites," as we do today; they called them Aithiopes ("Ethiopians"), which in Greek meant "Burnt-Faced Ones." They knew perfectly well that Nubians were black-skinned, as are the Sudanese of the same regions today.

Wonders: Black Pharaohs

Kush, the Egyptian name for ancient Nubia, was the site of a highly advanced, ancient black African civilization that rivaled ancient Egypt in wealth, power and cultural development. The first capital of Kush lay at Kerma just south of the Third Cataract of the Nile. Here dwelt powerful and wealthy black kings who controlled the trade routes connecting central Africa with ancient Egypt. The Egyptians, who had few natural resources of their own, sought the precious, exotic products of central Africa to satisfy the demands of their luxury-loving populace. By about 1500 B.C., the Egyptians, feeling threatened by the Nubian kings, invaded Kush and conquered it. For the next four centuries, the Egyptians exploited Kush as a colony. Egypt's wealth in gold came from the desert mines of Kush. The Egyptian word for gold is nub, which is thought by some to be the origin of the name Nubia.

Centuries later the Prophet Isaiah would refer to "Kush ... of whirring wings," likening it's army to a locust plague. Around 730 B.C., Kush's warrior hordes turned the tables on a weakened Egypt and conquered it. This event established the black Pharaohs of Kush. They ruled an Egyptian-Nubian empire



that extended from the Mediterranean to the confluence of the Blue and White Niles for sixty years. Historians would count their reign as Egypt's 25th Dynasty.

The Kushite pharaohs promoted a renaissance in Egypt and incorporated Egyptian culture, art, and philosophy into their homeland. They built magnificent temples at Jebel Barkaland Meroë, filling them with statuary, cultic implements and religious papyri, which became the inspirational force for their culture for centuries to come. The pyramid, abandoned as the proper tomb type by Egyptian kings a thousand years earlier, was revived by the Kushites and used by their monarchs for a thousand years, which is why today there are many more pyramids in the Sudan than in Egypt.

Wonders: Temples of Abu Simbel

The great temples of Abu Simbel are located south of Aswan, in northern Nubia. This monument was built by pharaoh Ramses II -- some say as a gesture of love for his wife Nefertari -- between 1290 and 1224 B.C., when most of Nubia was under Egyptian rule.

The Abu Simbel temples were carved out of a mountain on the west bank of the Nile. There are two: the colossal temple of Ramses, which was dedicated to the Egyptian gods Ra-Horakhty, Amun, and Ptah, and to the deified pharaoh himself. The smaller temple of Nefertari was dedicated to Hathor, the cow-headed Egyptian goddess of love. In the doorway to the main temple are four statues of Ramses, each more than 20 meters high, accompanied by smaller statues of the Queen Mother and Nefertari. Above the doorway stands a figure of the falcon-headed sun-god Ra-Horakhty. Inside, eight statues of Ramses hold up the roof of the Hypostyle Hall; the reliefs on the wall show the pharaoh victorious in various battles. In the next hall, Ramses and Nefertari are shown in front of the gods and the solar barques that will carry them to the underworld. The innermost chamber is the sacred sanctuary, where the gods (including Ramses) sit on their thrones. Every February 22 and October 22 at sunrise, light penetrates the temple and illuminates the faces of these figures¹.

Construction of a reservoir for the Aswan High Dam in the mid-1960s threatened the Abu Simbel temples, so an international team reassembled them on higher ground. This reconstruction effort -- which required that entire mountains be cut into blocks, moved, and reconstructed -- took more than four years and cost \$40 million.

Wonders: City of Jebel Barkal

Jebel Barkal was the capital and spiritual center of the ancient black kingdoms of the Nile for nearly a millenium. Pharaoh Ramses II constructed a temple to the Theban god Amon at Jebel Barkal in the 13th century B.C.; he and other Nubian pharaohs believed that the spirit of Amon resided in the mountain. King Taharqa, one of the greatest Nubian pharaohs, had the mountain's peak in gold during his reign in the 7th century B.C. and his name inscribed on a monument there.

During the 8th century B.C., King Piye further expanded his kingdom into Egypt after the Nubians conquered the Egyptians. He restored the temple at Jebel Barkal and erected a granite monument



inscribed with 159 lines of hieroglyphs -- the oldest and most extensively detailed surviving ancient Egyptian text. Jebel Barkal remained the capital of the Nubian kingdom until it was moved to Meroë around 300 B.C.

Wonders: City of Meroe

Rulers of Nubia established their capital at Meroë around 300 B.C., and the kingdom lasted there for more than nine centuries. Forty generations of Nubian royalty are buried in Meroë, and every royal Nubian tomb is housed within a pyramid. Meroitic pyramids are smaller and differ in architecture from Egyptian pyramids; the largest Nubian pyramid, with a base of 170 feet, is that of Taharqa, compared with the 750-foot base of Cheops' pyramid at Giza.

Contrary to the popularly-held belief that ancient Africans could not and did not develop their own written language, inscriptions in a distinct indigenous alphabet appear in Meroë as early as the 2nd century B.C. This written Meroitic language was used into the 5th century, when it was eventually replaced by Old Nubian. Widespread use of Meroitic on monuments indicates that a significant percentage of the population was able to read it. However, the meanings of these inscriptions remain unknown as this hieroglyphic-derived script is as yet untranslatable.

Reaching the height of prosperity in the 1st century A.D., Meroë may have covered an area up to a square mile. But most of the city remains unexcavated, and archaeologists have little idea of its layout. There were stone tombs and temples, but other more important buildings were made of red bricks; the humbler structures were almost certainly built of mud bricks. Within Meroë are traces of a royal palace and a large bath complex¹.

Meroë is also famed for its massive iron production, the first large-scale industry of its kind in the Nile Valley. But the technology of this industry is historically credited to the Romans, and not to the Nubians.



Part II.

Perceptions of African Identity

The Swahili Coast, an 1,800-mile stretch of Kenyan and Tanzanian coastline, has been the site of cultural and commercial exchanges between East Africa and the outside world - particularly the Middle East, Asia, and Europe - since at least the 2nd century A.D.

The earliest coastal communities practiced ironworking, and were mainly subsistence farmers and river fishers, who supplemented their economy with hunting, keeping livestock, fishing in the ocean, and trading with outsiders. Between 500 and 800 A.D. they shifted to a sea-based trading economy and began to migrate south by ship. In the following centuries, trade in goods from the African interior, such as gold, ivory, and slaves stimulated the development of market towns such as Mogadishu, Shanga, Kilwa, and Mombasa. By around the 9th century A.D., Africans, Arabs, and Persians who lived and traded on the coast had developed a lingua franca, Swahili, or Kiswahili, a language based on the Bantu language Sabaki that uses Arab and Persian loan words. They had also developed the distinctive Swahili culture, characterized by the almost universal practice of Islam, as well as by Arabic and Asian-influenced art and architectural styles.

The arrival of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in 1498 signaled a new era of foreign rule on the Swahili Coast. By this time Mombasa was the dominant Swahili power, so control over this city meant control over the coastal region. Portugal, seeking to monopolize trade throughout the Indian Ocean trade, built Fort Jesus in Mombasa, and also set up a customs house on Pate Island. The Portuguese were finally pushed out of power on the Swahili Coast in 1698 by combined forces from Oman and Pate, though the Portuguese remained in Mozambique until the late 20th century.

The imam (religious leader) of Oman then sought control of the coast, but matters closer to home drew his attention. It was instead the Mazrui clan of Mombasa (whose ancestors came from Omani long before) who gained predominance in the region. They were in turn driven out of the city in 1837 by Omani forces. The sultan of Oman then moved his capital to Zanzibar and established a commercial empire, bringing renewed prosperity to the coast.

The sultan then expanded his trading empire, sending caravans into the African interior to trade firearms for gold, ivory, and slaves. The slave trade on the East African coast had persisted for centuries, but it intensified during the early 19th century in order to meet the labor demands on French plantations on Réunion and Mauritius, as well as on the sultan's plantations on Zanzibar. Tippu Tip, one of the most powerful slave traders in Central and east Africa during that time, was hired by the sultan to raid villages in the Central African interior and sell the captives to American and European merchants at the Zanzibari slave market. By the late 19th century, pressure from the British had forced an end to the slave trade, and the Swahili Coast was exporting a variety of spices and other tropical crops.



Following the Scramble for Africa of the late 19th century, during which the European powers divided East Africa among themselves, the hegemony of the sultan in Zanzibar gave way to European overrule. The colonial powers began to control trade in the interior, bypassing the Swahili middlemen. Today Dar es Salaam and Mombasa are the biggest port cities on the Swahili Coast; both have been significantly transformed by industrial development as well as by the migration of upcountry Africans. Smaller Swahili towns, however, such as Pate in Kenya, retain much of their traditional culture. For these towns, beachfront tourism has become an important economic component.

Wonders: Historic Gedi

Gedi is a coastal town founded in the 13th century, the ruins from which are now an important historical site in Kenya. Built on a coral spur, its outer wall encompassed 45 acres. The opulent town proper resided within an inner wall, containing a palace, three pillar tombs, and a great mosque as well as several smaller mosques and private houses. Lying four miles inland and two miles from a navigable creek, Gedi was undoubtedly influenced by Swahili culture but probably did not participate directly in the trade that linked towns along the Swahili Coast. Gedi was never mentioned by the Portuguese, who occupied nearby Malindi from 1512 to 1593, nor in any other written record from around the time it was inhabited. Yet the ruins of Gedi show clear evidence of a highly developed and wealthy African civilization.

Archaeological excavations have determined that Gedi was founded in the 13th century and was probably rebuilt during the 15th century, the height of its prosperity. Gedi was abandoned in the 16th century, reoccupied for a short time, and then permanently abandoned in the early 17th century.

Many of the construction details indicate that builders considered the comfort and well-being of the city's occupants when constructing Gedi. The palace, for example, features sunken courts, the purpose of which was to create a longer shadow and therefore a cooler, more pleasant place to sit. Walls contained pegs for hanging carpets. In private residences, walls were thick and roofs were constructed of stamped red earth, also to create a cool living environment. All of the private residences and the palace included partitioned lavatories with washing bowls and bidets, as well as strong rooms off the owner's bedroom for storing valuables. These rooms contained no doorways; instead, one entered via a trapdoor reached by climbing a ladder. Sumps were located throughout the town to hold surface water that would otherwise have compromised the walls of structures.

A few hundred meters from the palace stood the great mosque, which was built around the middle of the 15th century. Constructed of stone, the roof was covered with coral tiles laid in lime concrete. A broad-bladed spear, a traditional Swahili symbol of kingship, was carved into its entranceway. Located at intervals around the inside walls were square niches in which lamps were placed for night prayers. Set in its north wall and framed with a herringbone border was an arched qibla, which showed the direction of Mecca, toward which Muslims are supposed to pray. On the east was a veranda and a court, which contained a well, cistern, and lavatory.



Archaeologists puzzle over why Gedi's residents abandoned it, but can offer no definitive answers. Possible reasons for its downfall include a Portuguese or Galla attack, a decrease in water tables that eliminated the water supply, or some sort of epidemic. The ruins were declared a historic monument in 1927 and are currently open to the public.

Who are the Swahili People?

The half-million people known as Swahili live along the coastline of East Africa from Somalia to Mozambique. Their language is taught in the United States as a basic "African" language, but few if any Swahili ever crossed the Atlantic as slaves: they themselves exported slaves across the Indian Ocean to Arabia and the East.

Who are the Swahili? Like any other peoples, they claim a particular identity, although one that has changed during their long history. They see it in ethnic terms, that of their believed place of origin. To understand this we need to know not only who they say they are and where they came from but also the roles they have played in the past and today.

Most African peoples are rural farmers, with their own indigenous religions, but the Swahili are urban dwellers with a Muslim and literate civilization. For centuries, they were merchants in the ancient commerce between the interior of Africa and the countries of the Indian Ocean, dealing mainly in ivory, gold, and slaves from Africa and in cloth and beads from Asia. To their ports came sailing ships from Arabia and India and foot caravans from the African interior. The British abolition of the export of slaves in 1873 and slavery itself in 1897 in Tanzania and 1907 in Kenya destroyed much of their former economy, and their role of wealthy merchants has been taken from them during the 20th century by international companies.

The Swahili merchants live in towns, many founded a thousand years ago. Other Swahili, farmers and fishermen, live in coastal villages. Each town is formed around its central mosque attended by the men. The merchants' houses, set in narrow streets and often two or three stories high, are elaborately designed and furnished, and in the past were of great wealth and luxury, with many domestic slaves. Merchant families kept themselves ethnically "pure" by marrying only their own close kin, in expensive and elaborate weddings. With their present impoverishment most of the luxury and splendor have gone.

Swahili identity is unique, but it is not a single uniform one. They have never formed a single polity, but are a cluster of groups each with its own occupation, way of life, and ranked position. These groups include the descendants of the original merchants; of the Arab rulers of the Sultanate of Zanzibar who came in the early 18th century from Oman in Arabia to establish a colonial state; of later Arab colonists who came in the 19th and 20th centuries; and of the slaves (who number half the population). In time, the Arabs and the slaves adopted the Swahili language and became "Swahili" themselves, although the differences are always recognized. There are also many recent labor immigrants from the African interior but these are never considered to be Swahili.



The merchants originated on the African coast during the first millennium and speak an African language closely related to those of their non-Muslim African neighbors. Their name, "The People of the Coast", was given to them by the rulers of the Sultanate of Zanzibar, who looked down on the local inhabitants and gave them this derogatory name; the Swahili rarely use it themselves, preferring those of their particular towns.

As coastal merchants, the Swahili face both towards Africa and towards Arabia and Asia. Despite their pride in their own civilization, at various times they have claimed to have come from Arabia or Persia, even though historical, archaeological, and linguistic evidence show this to be unfounded. To do so distinguished them from their slaves; as merchants, to claim family ties with their Asian partners made good business sense (as did also their early adoption of Islam); the British colonial administrators of East Africa separated "Arabs" from "Natives" by giving the former legal and tax advantages, and for this reason also many Swahili claimed Arabian identity. Their sophisticated lifestyle and their being literate and Muslim gave credence to these claims despite their lacking any real foundation. Today the governments of Kenya and Tanzania regard the Swahili as former slave traders and thus only marginally "African."

Nonetheless, historical evidence shows clearly that the Swahili are "African" in origin, even though many aspects of their civilization have been borrowed from Arabia and even India. The Swahili see themselves as neither "African" nor "Asian," but as having their own unique civilization, different from both those of Arabia or of their African neighbors.

Wonders: The Swahili People

The Swahili people number approximately half a million, inhabiting a string of small settlements along the East African coast in parts of Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania. They are believed to have descended from Bantu-speaking agriculturalists who lived in an area reaching roughly from Kenya's Tana River in modern Kenya to the Webi Shebelle region of Somalia. Although they had long supplemented their farming with fishing, it is believed that around 500 A.D. these people began to trade and migrate along the coast. Over the next three centuries migrant groups moved south by ship, establishing settlements both on the coast and on adjacent islands. These independent polities were linked by trade as well as by a common culture and language, Swahili. From an early date, merchants from the Arab peninsula, Persia, and India settled among and intermarried with the Swahili towns' African founders.

By the 12th century Swahili culture exhibited Arab and Asian cultural influences. A distinctive Swahili architecture had emerged, which reflected these influences. Houses made of coral rag and coral stone had replaced the circular mud-and-wattle buildings found in parts of inland East Africa. The ruins at the Gedi in Kenya provide one example of early Swahili architecture. Islam was also well established along the Swahili Coast by the 12th century, though elements of indigenous African religions remained.

For centuries Swahili merchants served as middlemen, exporting products from the East African interior in exchange for goods purchased from Indian Ocean merchant ships. Especially during the 19th century,



Swahili caravans traveled far into the interior in search of slaves and ivory, and some of these traders established inland trading posts. One of the most renowned nineteenth-century Swahili traders was the Zanzibari Tippu Tip, whose trading empire stretched from the East African coast to the western bank of the Lualaba River in the modern Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire).

The arrival of the Portuguese in the late 15th century began a long era of foreign rule on the Swahili Coast. The imam (religious leader) of Oman drove the Portuguese from the coast in 1698, and gradually established his authority over the coast. Omani influences on Swahili culture proved to be very significant. In addition to introducing many Arabic words into the Swahili language, the Omani cultivated the belief that the way they practiced Islam and their social status was superior to that of the Swahili. Arab ancestry thus became a marker of status.

Beginning in the late 19th century, European colonial rule brought further changes to Swahili society. Although parts of the Swahili Coast remained under Omani control, European colonialism eventually brought an end to slave trading, and more generally undermined the Swahili's traditional role as East African middlemen. Modern shipping has taken over the long-distance ocean trade routes once traveled by dhows, the Swahili's wooden sailing vessels. Cities such as Mogadishu and Mombasa, now major industrial ports, have attracted many migrants from the East African interior. Swahili now contains many English words and has become the lingua franca of much of East Africa, spoken by more than 130 million people.

Wonders: Island of Zanzibar

Often overshadowed by its larger partner in the United Republic of Tanzania, the island of Zanzibar nevertheless maintains a history and culture different and separate from that of the mainland. Once a key port on the thriving Indian Ocean trade routes, Zanzibar's history has been shaped by the people who sought to participate in and control these trades. Consequently, Zanzibar's population and culture reflect not only its proximity to the East Africa coast, but the influences of Asians, Arabs, and Europeans. During the colonial era, European powers took advantage of Arab hegemony to assume economic control of this thriving city-state and, in an effort to increase its prosperity, turned Zanzibar into a mono-crop export economy. Since independence, Zanzibar, with the aid of its mainland Tanzania, has tried to overcome this colonial legacy and prepare to compete in a global market where one-crop economies are becoming obsolete.

Historians believe that Zanzibar was first inhabited by fisherpeople who traveled to the island from mainland Africa around 4000 B.C. By 1000 B.C., Zanzibar and the islands off the coast of East Africa were familiar to the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans. As these Mediterranean empires extended their trade routes to the south and east, Zanzibar became one of several major commercial ports along the East African coast. Around the 3rd century, the trade in goods attracted the attention of merchants from southwestern Arabia who also began trading with the island residents, bringing weapons, wine, and wheat to barter for ivory and other luxury goods.



Cultural Close-Up: About the Swahili Language

Swahili is the official language of Tanzania and Kenya. Spoken by 130 million people, it is the lingua franca throughout most of East Africa, as well as parts of Central Africa. The language is heavily influenced by Arabic -- a result of the long-standing trading relationships in the region -- while many contemporary words are adapted from English. The main dialects of Swahili, or Kiswahili, as it is also called, are Kiunguja, Kimvita, and Kiamu.

Swahili has a long tradition of literary production, and poetry has been written in Swahili since at least the middle of the 17th century. It draws on Arabic, Persian, and Urdu literary sources. Though Swahili was originally only written in Arabic script, Latin script became more popular in the mid-19th century, and has since become standard. Many works of Western authors have been translated into Swahili, such as the well-known renderings of William Shakespeare's plays by Julius Nyerere.

Perhaps the most famous contemporary Swahili author is Shaaban Robert, a Tanzanian known for his poetry, children's literature, essays and novels.

Uncovering an African Scholarly Heritage

It is perhaps surprising that a place as comparatively close to Europe as West Africa should remain more or less unknown long after the colonization of the Americas. Indeed, it was not until 1828 that the first European saw Timbuktu and lived to tell the tale. This long isolation was due to many factors: the trackless wastes of the Sahara, the long distances from the coast to the Niger River fraught with danger and disease, and the desert and coastal peoples who preferred to maintain their exclusive position as trade middlemen between the Niger and the outer world. But this is no excuse for continuing near-ignorance in America and Europe of the fabulous history of the Middle Niger Valley in the modern Republic of Mali.

As early as 872 A.D. the Arab geographer al-Ya'kubi would write of the ancient state of Ghana (situated in part in the Middle Niger Valley) stating that it possessed a powerful king, with many lesser kings and kingdoms owing their allegiance to him, and that this king of kings controlled his country's mines of gold. Arab and Berber traders were already taking advantage of a profitable trade with the Empire of Ghana by the 9th century A.D., and were to continue to do so for centuries to come (see the Tuareg). However, to the western world, this land remained a mystery. The Niger River itself was misunderstood: Roman and Medieval European Geographers believed this great river to be part of the Nile and to flow westwards! Tantalizing rumors beckoned. In 1620, a British explorer of the West African coast, Richard Jobson, was told by an African trader (Buckor Sano) that far in the interior, two months travel away, was Timbuktu, "a great town, the houses whereof are covered in gold." Jobson returned to England and tried to fan interest in the exploration of the West African interior. But this was the dawning era of the Atlantic slave trade, and in comparison sources of gold seemed of little interest. Attention focused instead, for the next two centuries, on trade with African coastal powers who could supply slaves to the burgeoning plantations of the Americas.



It was not until the decline of the slave trade in the 19th century that foreign attention began once more to focus on the West African interior. Explorers such as the Scotsman Mungo Park and the Frenchman René Caillé sought to open new markets for European commerce and to broaden geographic knowledge. They were disappointed. The great kingdoms and commerce of legend had dissolved into the feuding of small armed factions and near anarchy -- only a momentary blip in the rise and fall of West African Empires to be sure -- but sufficient to give explorers a biased impression of local politics and facilitate a colonial take-over.

Colonial impressions of a 'barbarous' and 'indolent' Africa gave rise to a mass of unfortunate scholarly theories which were to persist until the 1970s. The great English archaeologist Grahame Clark wrote as recently as 1961 that Africa had "already during Late Pleistocene times slipped far behind in the race of human progress." Likewise, historians depicted the ancient West African states of Ghana and Mali as founded by 'Semitic races,' and in any event existing only as satellites -- reliant upon Trans-Saharan commerce for their existence.

Happily, the past few decades of scholarly research have begun to dramatically change these views. On a world scale, prehistoric Africa has been shown to be a major innovator in the development of ceramics (by 9,000 years before present), in the domestication of cattle (by 8,000 years before present), and in iron technology (by 2,800 years before present). Regarding Mali, the chronology and development of its ancient states has been re-cast. Instead of power centers being created by Arab run Trans-Saharan trade, beginning around 800 A.D., we now know that there were cities along the Middle Niger as early as 300 A.D. (Jenne-jeno, Dia, and others). These emergent urban centers featured mudbrick architecture, city walls, and thriving markets. Indeed, we may trace the origins of the complex societies which inhabited these towns to earlier Mande 'chiefdoms' which existed along the Dhar Tichitt-Oualata escarpment range in Mauritania (by 1250 B.C.). The roots of cultural complexity along the Niger appear to have been founded more on inter-regional trade in commodities (cattle, salt, grain, minerals, etc.) than upon the lure of exotic goods from the Mediterranean world. The archaeological landscape between Djenne and Timbuktu is dotted with the mounded remnants of hundreds of ancient towns and villages. So far only a handful of these have been even test-excavated and much remains to be learned from their investigation. Additionally, historians have begun to increasingly respect the oral historical legacy of Malian griots, whose generations of memorized knowledge now supplement and challenge Arabic textual sources.

Through the media and tourism Americans and Europeans are beginning to learn of such surprising things as the one thousand year old city of Djenné and its Sudanic architectural style (see Great Mosque of Djenne), the ancient "University of Timbuktu," (see Sankore Mosque) and the even more ancient accomplishments of the peoples of Mali. The substance behind the ancient myths of Mali, which enthralled 19th century explorers, is beginning to become clear, and the future promises to bring ever more of West Africa's cultural heritage to light.



Wonders: The Dogon People

According to oral tradition, the Dogon people of south-central Mali originated near the headwaters of the Niger River, and fled their homes sometime between the 10th and 13th centuries because they refused to convert to Islam. However, the Voltaic language of the Dogon suggests a more ancient presence in their present-day homeland. They inhabit a rugged and isolated environment where cliffs protected the group from outside invaders, including French colonialists and missionaries.

Traditionally, the extended patrilineal family forms the basic social unit of the Dogon, who lack strong centralized authorities. A hogan, or headman (traditionally the oldest man in the area), provides spiritual leadership and safeguards the religious masks for which the Dogon are famous; however, a council of elders holds decision-making power within each village. The Dogon maintain a kind of caste system based on occupation. Farmers rank at the top of the system, while blacksmiths and hunters, who perform "polluting" work, are lower on the caste scale.

Unlike their Muslim neighbors, most Dogon still practice a traditional religion with a complex mythology. Dogon cosmology considers every being a combination of complementary opposites; elaborate rituals are necessary to maintain the balance. Ancestor-worship is another importance facet of Dogon religion. Members of the "Society of Masks" perform rituals to guarantee that a person's "life force" will flee from his or her corpse to a future relative of the same lineage. One of the most famous Dogon rituals is the Sigi -- a series of rituals performed once every 60 years. Islamic missionaries, however, have had some success among the Dogon, and approximately 35 percent of the Dogon population are now Muslim.

Wonders: Great Mosque of Djenne

The current Great Mosque of Djenne, although a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the great architectural wonders of Africa, is not the original mosque of Djenne. The first Great Mosque of Djenne was built in the 13th century by Koy Konboro -- Djenne's first Islamicized ruler. As a vivid expression of his new-found faith, Koy Konboro had his palace destroyed, and the first Great Mosque built in its place. For six centuries, this massive mosque, comparable in size to the current Great Mosque, dominated the center of the town. By the 19th century, however, political and ideological conflicts within the Inland Delta caused the abandonment of the old mosque, which fell into ruin, in favor of a more modest mosque identified with the fundamentalist Islamic warrior-king Cheikou Amadou and his influence over the town (built 1835). Photos, and even postcards, exist showing Djenne's first Great Mosque in ruins. However, in 1906-1907 the current Great Mosque of Djenne was built on the site of the first Great Mosque in the monumental Sudanic style and has ever since remained the visual symbol of the town. The current Great Mosque of Djenne stands with all but its western side well-removed from neighboring structures at the center of the town's marketplace. Beside it are monumental tombs of great Islamic scholars, including one of a former imam of Djenne who died in 1724.



Wonders: Ruins of Jenne-Jeno

The archaeological site of Jenne-jeno, situated beside the historic town of Djenne, was brought to the attention of the world by the 1977 and 1981 excavations of Roderick and Susan McIntosh. Their continuing excavations at this mudbrick settlement mound have exposed a sequence of occupation extending from 250 B.C. to 1400 A.D. From this town's foundation, its inhabitants fished, cultivated rice and sorghum and kept livestock. Trade with adjoining regions brought in commodities such as sandstone, copper, iron, and gold. By 450 A.D., local craft specialization, the construction of a monumental city wall, and the growth of a regional site hierarchy centered on Jenne-jeno point to an urban status for the site. As such, it is one of the earliest cities of Sub-Saharan Africa and has been classed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. However, it should be stressed that Jenne-jeno is only one of more than a dozen sites of similar size, and potentially greater antiquity, which remain to be investigated in Mali's Middle Niger region.

Wonders: Empires of Mali and Ghana

The Empire of Ghana has no geographical connection with the modern African state of that name. Rather, its boundaries would have included most of modern Mali and parts of modern Senegal and Mauritania. Modern Ghana, formerly the Gold Coast during the Colonial Era, was named after this great state of African antiquity.

By the time Arab geographers began to write of West Africa in the 8th century A.D., the Empire of Ghana -- described as a "land of gold" -- was already in existence. This ancient state's origins, however, remain unclear. The *Tarikh as-Sudan*, a book of West African history written in Timbuktu around 1650 A.D., claims that the Empire of Ghana had 22 kings before the beginning of the Muslim era (622 A.D.), and 22 kings afterwards. If this is anything more than an exercise in symmetry, then we may expect the origins of the Empire of Ghana to extend back to the first few centuries A.D. Certainly there is good archaeological evidence for the existence of large towns within, and north of, the Inland Niger Delta by ca. 300 A.D.

During the 10th and 11th centuries A.D., Ghana's fame grew and it is described in some detail by geographers and compilers of travelers' tales at that time. In these writings, Ghana is depicted as a great military power which could put "200,000 warriors in the field, more than 40,000 being armed with bow and arrow." The king, it was said, controlled the flow of gold from the south, and the traffic of salt from the north.

In 1076 A.D., the capital of Ghana fell to the Almoravid Berber jihad, launched from Morocco. The once great Empire decomposed into a number of small feuding kingdoms. Out of this disorder would arise the greatest of West Africa's pre-Colonial Empires -- that of Mali.



Led by the great King Sunjata Keita (ruled ca. 1245-1270 A.D.), the Malinke conquered their oppressors (the Sosso) and gained control of the trans-Saharan trade routes. In the fullness of time, the Empire of Mali expanded, reaching its height under the rule of Kankan Musa (ruled ca. 1312-1327 A.D.). By that time, the Empire's territory comprised most of modern Mali and Senegal, and parts of Mauritania and Guinea. Many monumental mosques were constructed during the reign of Mansa Kankan Musa who is still remembered as a great Islamic ruler. However, Mali would not last long, driven by internal dissent and military conflicts with the Tuareg, the Empire gradually dissolved during the 15th century A.D.

Wonders: Niger River

The Niger is one of Africa's three great rivers -- the others being the Nile and the Congo. Its source lies in the Fouta Djallon highlands of Guinea and its course plunges suicidally towards the Sahara through Mali until it again takes a southward course near Gao. The Niger then traverses part of the Republic of Niger and then Benin before flowing through Nigeria to the South Atlantic. Its two Deltas, the Inland Delta and the Coastal Delta, are enormous. The coastal delta in Nigeria covers 35,000 square kilometers and is the largest in Africa. The Inland Delta of 6,000 square kilometers is West Africa's greatest inland water.

The rich agricultural lands fringing the Niger, and particularly its Inland Delta, have served as the 'bread-basket' for a succession of civilizations beginning at least as early as 300 A.D. Its ecological cycles of flood and the retreat of waters encourage a complex web of human economies: fisherfolk who live on or beside the river, rice agriculturists who plant on its banks, millet farmers who plant far from its floods on sandy ground, and pastoralists who enter the delta at the time of low waters -- after the harvest -- to graze their cattle and fertilize the land.

Wonders: Sankore Mosque

One of the two historic mosques of Timbuktu (the other being the Jingereber), the Sankore mosque was built during the declining years of the Empire of Mali, in the early 15th century A.D. Architecturally, it is remarkable for its large pyramidal mihrab. But this is not its real claim to fame -- indeed, it is smaller and less intricate than earlier Malian mosques including the 13th century mosque of Djenne. Instead, it is famous for being the center of the great Islamic scholarly community at Timbuktu during the 16th century A.D. The medieval "University of Timbuktu," often referred to as the "University of Sankore" was very different in organization to the universities of medieval Europe. It had no central administration, student registers, or prescribed courses of study; rather, it was composed of several entirely independent schools or colleges, each run by a single master or imam. Students associated themselves with a single teacher, and courses took place in the open courtyards of mosque complexes or private residences. The primary focus of these schools was the teaching of the Koran, although broader instruction in fields such as logic, astronomy, and history also took place. As anyone who wished could establish one of these colleges, standards amongst them are said to have been very uneven. However the imams of the Sankore mosque are known to have been the most respected. The university was adversely affected by the Moroccan invasion of the 1590s and the deportation of its best scholars. It never again regained its 16th century eminence.



Wonders: The Tuareg People

The Tuareg are a diffuse group of Berber nomadic peoples. The origins of the Caucasoid Berber peoples in the Sahara, as substantiated by tombs and rock art, is thought to extend back to at least 2000 B.C. Currently, the Tuareg people live in the Sahara and its fringes in Mali, Niger, and Algeria. They have their own ancient alphabet and written script, and a highly stratified system of social classes including a nobility. In pre-colonial times their pastoral economy was supplemented by a warrior ethic and its resulting pillage. They have historically maintained a caste of agricultural dark skinned slaves or serfs, now a veritable ethnic group, termed the Izeggaren or Bella.

The Tuareg are justly famed as the founders of Timbuktu, which began as a small Tuareg village around 1100 A.D. However the Songhai, a Sub-Saharan group, were the primary occupants of Timbuktu as it became a city. Over time, the Tuareg have repeatedly vied for control of Timbuktu, mounting raids on the town from the vast Sahara. This historical conflict continues today, with the latest event in this long series of battles being the Tuareg revolt of the 1990s in both Mali and Niger.

Griot: Oral Storytelling Tradition

Griots are a caste of people within Mande society who are responsible for the maintenance of oral traditions, both local and epic, in speech and song. Mande society (defined by a related group of languages) includes such modern ethnic groups as the Bozo, the Soninke, the Malinke, the Bambara, and many other peoples currently living in Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and neighboring countries. Within court structures, griots supply a legitimizing narrative of rulers' genealogies and retain memorized records of their deeds. Today, many members of griot families have become pop stars both within West Africa and internationally. Others, at a more local level, perform at marriages and at the parties of wealthy local businessmen and civic leaders -- singing the praises of their hosts in return for financial contributions.

Ethiopia: An Ancient Legacy of Christianity

For over 3,000 years Ethiopia has been a land of mystery and fascination. The Greek poet Homer thought that the Ethiopians had been blessed by the gods, while the historians and dramatists who came after him described a people of immense piety who lived beside the fountain of the sun. In the Middle Ages, the kings of Europe began to search for a mythical Ethiopian king named Prester John, beginning the Age of Discovery when they sailed along the coast of Africa. In the early years of our own century, the famous African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois described Ethiopia as "the all mother of men," and in recent years we have begun to see a new truth in his claim as the oldest human remains are excavated there.

Mythical history is part of an Ethiopian fascination with the Old Testament which seems to begin in the Dark Ages after the power of the great ancient city of Aksum began to diminish. In the 6th century, the kings of Aksum had been powerful enough to lead a Crusade into Arabia, defeating a Jewish king who had slaughtered Christians in the caravan city of Najran, and leaving a memory of powerful black



warriors among the poets of Arabia. With the rise of Islam, however, the Red Sea trade was no longer controlled from Aksum and its rulers began to move south. The throne passed to a different line of kings, descendants of a Cushitic tribe called the Zagwe. They were never accepted by the old regime, and the powerful abbots of the northern monasteries, especially Debra Damo, succeeded in replacing them with a king who claimed descent from King Solomon (the Solomonid Dynasty). The Zagwe also claimed Israelite descent and several of them are still venerated as saints in Ethiopia. The most renowned, Lalibela, is said to have created one of the greatest wonders of Africa after an angel carried him to heaven: a city cut from the living rock in the highlands of Lasta, which is now called by his name. Thirteen churches can still be seen in the rock, an astonishing variety of passages leading deep into the hillside, revealing hidden chapels and sanctuaries where the ancient faith is preserved by priests and monks, and the bodies of thousands of devoted pilgrims were carefully stored until the end of the world.

When the Solomonid dynasty replaced the Zagwe around 1270 A.D., they built no capital to rival Aksum or Lalibela. Instead, a nomadic court traveled throughout the country, so that the kings could keep the great aristocrats under their control, reducing their wealth by forcing them to feed the court during its visit. As the emperors of the Solomonid dynasty conquered the neighboring regions, they brought large numbers of people who were pagan or Muslim under Christian control. Fearing that such diversity would threaten the stability of his empire, Zara Yaqob imposed a cult of the Virgin Mary as the New Ark of the Covenant. She had carried the presence of God within her before Christ was born just as the Ark carried the presence of God in the Tablets of the Law. As part of this cult, he required that icons of the Virgin be venerated, and Fere Seyon, the greatest of his court artists, produced a number of spectacular painted panels that survived the Muslim invasion of the 15th century.

When the Portuguese who had been searching for Prester John finally reached the Ethiopian court, the Christian empire was threatened by Muslim armies led by Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, known as Grañ, "the Left-handed." The son of the Portuguese mariner Vasco da Gama died in the final battle. Even though the empire was saved, the Ethiopians were now exposed to the ambitions of the Jesuits, who wished to convert their ancient Church to Roman Catholicism. Although the emperor Susneyos was converted to Catholicism, his decision brought the empire to the brink of civil war, and in 1632 he abdicated in favor of his son, Fasiladas, who expelled them.

Fasiladas built a new capital at Gondar, near Lake Tana. The site was remarkably beautiful, and many of the castles and churches of the imperial capital still stand today among groves of trees. The palaces of the Gondarine emperors seem to have been built by foreign as well as Ethiopian masons, and their splendid towers and walls are unique. The city was an emporium along important caravan routes between the north and the south, and most of the trade was in the hands of Muslim merchants who lived in a separate quarter of the city. Gondar was also home to Beta Israel, "the House of Israel," who claimed to be Jews. They are also known as Falasha, a word that seems to refer to their separation from the rest of Ethiopian society, and Falasha craftsmen provided many essential skills that Ethiopian Christians were unwilling to perform, from pottery to metalwork.



Ethiopian chronicles record the lives of many powerful women, and the 18th century empress Mentewwab was one of the greatest. She had been born an Oromo, but became Christian after she married the emperor Bakaffa. He was captivated by her beauty, and also hoped that the marriage would help relations between the Christian establishment and the Oromo warriors who had been invading the empire from the South. As Bakaffa had feared, the power of the Gondarine empire was eventually weakened by the presence of the Oromo, as well as by the doctrinal disputes that had undermined the Church. Real power passed to regional warlords in what is called the Era of the Princes, the decades of civil war that ended in 1855 when Kasa Haylu defeated his rivals and became the emperor Tewodros II. He began to bring European technology into the ancient empire, but the world was still astonished in 1896 when the emperor Menelik II won a famous victory over an Italian army that crossed the Ethiopian frontier. The event caused a political crisis in Italy, leading the country toward extreme nationalism and eventually fascism, but it aroused admiration among people who had been subject to colonialism themselves.

In 1930, Ras Tafari was crowned as Haile Selassie, the last emperor. When he was crowned, Marcus Garvey and other black leaders in America and the Caribbean announced that Selassie fulfilled a Biblical prophecy that kings would come out of Africa. Fascination with the black Christian emperor became most intense among those who believed him to be no less than God incarnate, and to have escaped death during the Revolution of 1974. This Rastafarian belief has been spread throughout the world by Jamaican musicians, most notably by Bob Marley.

Wonders: City of Aksum

Located in northern Ethiopia, Aksum reached its height between the 1st and 10th centuries, recalled in later centuries as a golden age. This was a kingdom of great wealth and sophistication, controlling the caravan routes from the hinterland of Africa, and the ancient Greek geographers describe its trade in ivory and slaves. Its kings minted a gold coinage when almost no one else in the world was rich enough to afford it or sophisticated enough to require it.

Aksum's mythical past has been preserved in the famous epic known as The Glory of Kings. This describes the Queen of Sheba travelling from Ethiopia to visit King Solomon in Jerusalem, in the hope of learning something of his famous wisdom. The king is fascinated by her beauty and her intelligence, and the son who is born from their union becomes the founder of the Ethiopian dynasty. When he travels to Jerusalem himself to be anointed by his father, the Ark of the Covenant, the chest containing the tablets of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments, accompanies him to Ethiopia, where it will remain until the End of Time and the Last Judgement. According to Ethiopian tradition, the Ark of the Covenant remains at Aksum today, under close guard of a priest.

Wonders: Debra Damo Monastery

The ancient monastery of Debra Damo is the oldest standing church in Ethiopia and the center of the Ethiopian church. Debra Damo is built on a high plateau north of Aksum, and can only be reached by



scaling a cliff by means of a leather rope. Its inaccessibility gives some clue why the monastery served as a sanctuary for Ethiopia's rulers during times of war.

According to Ethiopian tradition, holymen known as the Nine Saints arrived in Ethiopia in the 5th or 6th century to spread Christianity. One of these men, Za-Mikael Aregawi, is believed to have founded Debra Damo. It was a monk trained at Debra Damo who became the patron of the Solomonid pretender Yekuno Amlak, and helped him to overthrow the last of the Zagwe kings. Especially during the Zagwe dynasty, the aristocratic families of the north saw the great monasteries as an alternate base for power. As the wealth of the monasteries depended on temporary land grants known as *gült*, the abbots had to possess the sophistication of a courtier. The king often used these grants to enrich the monasteries that would support him, and the Zagwe were quite rightly suspicious of Debra Damo.

Wonders: Falasha Village

The earliest reference to the Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews), or Falasha appears in the chronicles of the emperor Amda Seyon, who ruled in the first half of the 14th century. Although it seems likely that there were Jews in Ethiopia at an early date, there is no evidence that the kings of Aksum displayed the fascination with Israelite customs or even Israelite descent that becomes so powerful under the Solomonid emperors. Given that almost all their literature is Christian in origin, that they preserved customs such as monasticism that cannot be found among other Jews, and that they were ignorant of Hebrew until quite recently, it seems that the Beta Israel are not an ancient Jewish community in origin, but a dissident Christian community. When the Solomonid emperors placed such emphasis on ancient Judaic custom, one way of resisting their pretensions may have been to adopt an even more Judaic identity.

In the fifteenth century, the Christian emperors began to wage war against the Beta Israel, who became increasingly estranged from the Christian state. It is at this time that their distinctive identity begins to emerge as a way of developing and strengthening a unique sense of their own identity. Their estrangement from the state meant that increasingly they became artisans, and undertook crafts such as metalwork that were generally despised or regarded as unclean.

In the 16th century, the chronicle of the emperor Sarsa Dengel describes the great bravery of the Beta Israel who fought against the emperor in the mountains of Semien. At the beginning of the 17th century, the emperor Susneyos began a fierce persecution of Beta Israel living between Lake Tana and the Semien. While his son Fasiladas was less hostile, the position of the Beta Israel in the following centuries was always precarious.

In 1904, the Beta Israel came into increasing contact with international Jewish communities. This led to dramatic changes, especially the disappearance of monasticism, the introduction of a calendar of festivals observed by Jews elsewhere, and an increasing use of Hebrew. In late 1984 and early 1985, Operation Moses brought thousands of Beta Israel to Israel itself, where a bitter debate began about whether they were really Jews.



Wonders: City of Gondar

Gondar, with its spectacular castles, was the capital of the Ethiopia kingdom from the 17th through the 19th century.

In 1632 the emperor Fasiladas built the first castle at Gondar, then a village near Lake Tana. He may not have intended to create a new capital, but he hoped to find a better residence during the rainy season than the tents of the earlier nomadic court. During the following decades, however, Gondar did become the capital of the empire, and it remained so until the middle of the 19th century. It seems that each emperor built his own castle, ignoring those of his ancestors - a custom that may lie in the competitive nature of Amhara and Tigrinya society, where young men have traditionally proved their status by surpassing their elders as well as their rivals. The fact that their defensive walls would not have withstood the military technology of the day suggests that they were constructed largely for display. Ethiopian emperors liked to display their wealth and power by employing foreign experts, and some scholars believe the palaces incorporate the skills of Italian or Indian masons, as contacts with both countries had increased after the Portuguese had arrived in Ethiopia in the 16th century.

Gondar declined during the chaotic Era of the Princes (1706-1853 A.D.), when powerful local warlords dominated the emperors who lived among the crumbling palaces. The emperor Tewodros II, whose supremacy ended the anarchy of the Princes, sacked Gondar twice during the 1860s, removing the treasures of its churches. The troops of the Mahdi, the Islamic reformer who founded a state in neighboring Sudan, also burned the city during the 1880s. Many of the most impressive castles and churches remain, however, along with a charming pavilion known as the Bath of Fasiladas where the festival of Timkat is still celebrated every year to mark the baptism of Christ.

Today Gondar is an important regional economic and cultural center and the capital of Gondar province.

Cultural Close-Up: Timkat Festival

The Timkat Festival, held each year in Gondar, is the biggest Christian festival in Ethiopia. It's an Epiphany celebration, commemorating John's baptism of Christ in the waters of the River Jordan.

In churches throughout the country, the tabots, or replicas of the sacred Ark of the Covenant, are carried from their sanctums on cushions held high on the heads of the priests in a solemn procession to Gondar's central square, then toward Fasilidas's palace. As they walk, the priests are surrounded by crowds of people, all dressed in their religious finery, who dance around the precious tabots en route. This is one of the few times of the year that the people are allowed close to the sacred tabots, which are covered with brocade cloths. The procession moves into the gardens of the bathhouse at Fasilidas's castle, then into the palace sanctuary.

As evening falls, the people gather in the garden surrounding the palace to prepare their food and drink the local beer brewed especially for the celebration. Families prepare to spend the night out in the open, outside the sanctuary which is guarded by the priests. The next morning, the people gather by the



thousand around Fasilidas's Pool before dawn. Precisely at 5:00 a.m., the priests begin their blessings, and in a religious euphoria, hundreds of people jump into the freezing cold water in a mass baptism -- many believing that the waters are a cure for infertility and a religious blessing. The tabots are then carried back to their churches by the priests, escorted by the crowd.

Reclaiming a Stole History

When European settlers discovered ruins of great civilizations at Mapungubwe in South Africa and Great Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe (then the British colony Rhodesia), they concluded that these marvelous stone cities could not have been built by black Africans. In order to justify their oppression of the black majority population, the white imperialists created a grossly distorted history that denied African civilization and culture.

In fact, until the recent end of the apartheid era, the official South African version of history maintained that southern Africa was an empty land, completely uninhabited until the first Dutch settlers arrived there in 1652. The government rationalized that the exquisite art and surviving architecture of the Shona and Bantu people of South Africa and Zimbabwe were actually the creations of Arabs, Phoenicians, or other non-African peoples. Similarly, the government of Rhodesia censored guidebooks and until as recently as the 1970s instructed archaeologists to deny that the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe was built by Africans.

But the reality is that Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe, as well as Thulamela, a more recent discovery, were black civilizations that developed sophisticated international trading economies and remarkable architecture in southern Africa as early as the 11th century A.D. Great Zimbabwe was such a source of black national pride that when Rhodesia gained independence from the British in 1980, it named itself Zimbabwe after its own great precolonial civilization. Today, Great Zimbabwe remains a symbol of national unity, and its likeness is depicted on the national currency.

Wonders: City of Great Zimbabwe

The Great Zimbabwe is the most famous of a large group of stone-walled enclosures on the Zimbabwean plateau. The modern Zimbabwe nation took its name from this major cultural monument.

In the language of the Shona people of eastern Zimbabwe, the word zimbabwe means "stone building." The highest point of the site is a fortress that has a commanding view of the surrounding grasslands, and can only be approached through a series of narrow defiles. According to scholars, the structure was erected by Shona people over the course of about four hundred years, beginning in the early 11th century.

At its height in the 13th century, Great Zimbabwe's capital was home to as many as 18,000 people. Subsistence to support such population concentrations remained crucial, and it is likely that cattle and agricultural surplus played a highly visible role in the maintenance of power.



The collapse of the Great Zimbabwe occupation is dated to the mid- to late 15th century, when most of the site was abandoned. Reasons posited for Great Zimbabwe's collapse have included the possible exhaustion of local gold, arable land, or water resources, and the disruption of the Indian Ocean trading sphere by the Portuguese. Majestic successor states such as Khami, located farther in the interior, soon sprang up, but none ever achieved the power of Great Zimbabwe, which remained an important religious shrine until the 19th century.

Wonders: City of Mapungubwe

Mapungubwe is a 1,000-year-old city located at the basin of the Limpopo River in South Africa. It reached its height during the 11th century and was the first in a number of trading states developed by the Bantu people who built their wealth through cattle herding.

Perched on a plateau 985 feet long and 164 feet high, Mapungubwe is surrounded by sandstone cliffs and can be reached only by rope. The people who lived there transported to the top 2,000 tons of soil for farming. They created intricate gold artifacts and pottery and traded goods as far away as India and China.

Since discovery of its ruins in the 1930s, Mapungubwe has been owned and excavated by the University of Pretoria. Because South Africa's apartheid system taught that South Africa was uninhabited until the white settlers arrived in the 17th century, it was considered an embarrassment for the South African government or to the conservative University to admit that they had discovered this ancient African city. So this great treasure found at Mapungubwe has remained in the University's basement, hidden away from the public for the past seventy years. Historians and archaeologists now can tell us that Mapungubwe is one of hundreds of similar ancient towns in Southern Africa that were settled by black Africans more than 1,000 years ago.

Wonders: The Shona People

The history and culture of the Shona people is contested and complex. Those who call themselves Shona and speak a Shona dialect inhabit present-day Zimbabwe, southern Zambia, and west-central Mozambique. The exact origin of the Shona is unknown: linguists generally contend that the diversity of dialects indicate a first millennium arrival, while historians usually date the arrival of Shona speakers to the Iron Age. The Shona were most likely the first Bantu-speaking people in the area, displacing the Khoikhoi and possibly some central Sudanic inhabitants. By the 10th century, Shona speakers had become the most numerous people between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers, though they were by no means the only inhabitants.

The Shona comprised a mosaic of disparate chieftainships, similar in their languages and livelihoods - based on a combination of agriculture and animal husbandry - but with a diversity of religious beliefs and customs. Although all were patrilineal, their political organization and means of succession varied considerably. Familial and dynastic competition was common, though there were no standing armies and major conflicts were few.



After 1000 A.D., centralized states began to emerge among the Shona. It was not until the 14th century, however, that these empires became distinguishable, as they competed for trade in gold and ivory with Arab and, later, Portuguese merchants. Major empires include Great Zimbabwe, Changamire, Thulamela and Torwa.

In addition, the Shona, with their contested history and varied past, have also adapted to popular culture; "Shona stone sculpture" produced by contemporary Shona artists, for example, has gained international recognition as a fine art form.

Wonders: City of Thulamela

The ruins of the ancient stone city of Thulamela were uncovered less than a decade ago in the Kruger National Park of South Africa's northern provinces. Thulamela, whose name means "place of giving birth," was built by the Shona people about 800 years ago. The city thrived between 1350 and 1650 A.D. and its people employed sophisticated mining skills, and succeeded in converting iron ore into carbon steel for use in tools and weapons, and traded along the Swahili Coast.¹

While Thulamela, like its fellow ancient state Mapungubwe, also was excavated by the University of Pretoria, its recent discovery has been handled very differently from the latter seventy years ago: the Thulamela site is open to the public. This is the result of the new, open spirit of post-apartheid South Africa.



Part III.

Confronting the Legacy of the African Slave Trade

Historically, West Africa is associated with the slave, gold and ivory trades, perhaps most often the former. West Africa is also the place of origin of vodou, the only indigenous African religion to survive the trans-Atlantic slave trade and remain in practice in the Americas today. The historical roots of racial discrimination in the United States today can be traced back to North American slavery and the kidnapping of more than 20 million Africans. It is easily assumed, therefore, that the African slave trade pit brutal, gun-wielding European slaver traders against unsuspecting, passive African victims. While the Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, English and French slave traders were often brutal, they were not always working alone -- many Africans were also complicit in this victimization. Precolonial empires such as Dahomey and Ashanti (located in what is now Benin and Ghana), where slave ports at Ouidah and Elmina flourished, accumulated enormous wealth and power as a result of the trade of their fellow Africans.

In fact, Europeans often acted as junior partners to African rulers, merchants, and middlemen in the slave trade along the West African coast from the mid-15th century on. Two factors contributed to this dependency: the coastal geography and the diseases of West Africa. Seasonal wind patterns along the Atlantic coast of Africa generated heavy surf and dangerous crosscurrents, which in turn buffeted a land almost entirely lacking in natural harbors. Hazardous offshore reefs and sandbars complicated the matter even further for seafarers along the West African coast. European commerce in West Africa took place, therefore, most often on ships anchored well away from shore and dependent on skilled African canoe-men whose ability to negotiate across the hazardous stretch of water between the mainland and the waiting ships made the Atlantic trade possible. Even in places where Europeans were able to conduct trade on the mainland, their presence was limited by an epidemiological situation that impeded their livelihood and threatened their lives. Malaria, dysentery, yellow fever, and other diseases reduced the few Europeans living and trading along the West African coast to a chronic state of ill health and earned Africa the name "white man's grave." In this environment, European merchants were rarely in a position to call the shots.

Furthermore, when Europeans first initiated a trading relationship with West Africans in the mid-15th century they encountered well-established and highly-developed political organizations and competitive regional commercial networks. Europeans relied heavily on the African rulers and mercantile classes at whose mercy, more often than not, they gained access to the commodities they desired. European military technology was not effective enough to allow them this access by means of force on a consistent basis until the 19th century. Therefore it was most often Africans, especially those elite coastal rulers and merchants who controlled the means of coastal and river navigation, under whose authority and to whose advantage the Atlantic trade was conducted.

Domestic slave ownership as well as domestic and international slave trades in western Africa preceded the late 15th-century origins of the Atlantic slave trade. Since most West African societies did not



recognize private property in land, slaves functioned as one of the only profitable means of production individuals could own. West Africans, therefore, acquired and expressed wealth in terms of dependent people, whether as kin, clients, or slaves. Moreover, caravan routes had long linked sub-Saharan African peoples with North Africa and the wider Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds. Not only was slavery an established institution in West Africa before European traders arrived, but Africans were also involved in a trans-Saharan trade in slaves along these routes. African rulers and merchants were thus able to tap into preexisting methods and networks of enslavement to supply European demand for slaves. Enslavement was most often a byproduct of local warfare, kidnapping, or the manipulation of religious and judicial institutions. Military, political, and religious authority within West Africa determined who controlled access to the Atlantic slave trade. And some African elites, such as those in the Dahomey and Ashanti empires, took advantage of this control and used it to their profit by enslaving and selling other Africans to European traders.

It is important to distinguish between European slavery and African slavery. In most cases, slavery systems in Africa were more like indentured servitude in that the slaves retained some rights and children born to slaves were generally born free. The slaves could be released from servitude and join a family clan. In contrast, European slaves were chattel, or property, who were stripped of their rights. The cycle of slavery was perpetual; children of slaves would, by default, also be slaves.

Although the historical reality is sometimes difficult to accept by African Americans who still face racial discrimination over a century after the abolition of slavery, African complicity in the slave trade neither justifies today's social problems nor minimizes their seriousness. Fifteenth-century Africa, was not a homogenous group of people. Some African elites benefited from the enslavement of their rivals, their enemies, their poor, and other culturally foreign groups from the 15th century through the 18th and even into the 19th centuries. Class, language, religion, gender, and ethnicity divided Africans, and it was along these lines that certain Africans participated in the slave trade. Understanding the dynamics of African complicity in the slave trade is important in understanding Africans as historically active and diverse human beings. This understanding should not detract from the horrors of the slave trade or from its American legacy of inequality and racism.

Wonders: Ashanti Kingdom

The Ashanti (or Asante), are the dominant ethnic group of a powerful 19th-century empire and today one of Ghana's leading ethnic groups, with more than two million members concentrated in south-central Ghana.

The political, military, and spiritual foundations of the Ashanti nation date to the first Ashanti king, Osei Tutu. He forged the Ashanti Union by bringing together several subgroups from roughly 1670 to the 1690s. He also built a capital, Kumasi; created the legend of the Golden Stool to legitimize his rule; and began celebrating the Odwira, or yam festival, as a symbol of national unity. From 1698 to 1701, the united Ashanti army defeated the Denkyira people, who had conquered the Ashanti in the early 17th



century. Over the course of the 18th century, the Ashanti conquered most of the surrounding peoples, including the Dagomba.

By the early 19th century, Ashanti territory covered nearly all of present-day Ghana, including the coast, where the Ashanti could trade directly with the British. In exchange for guns and other European goods, the Ashanti sold gold and slaves, usually either captured in war or accepted as tribute from conquered peoples. As they prospered, Ashanti culture flourished. They became famous for gold and brass craftsmanship, wood carving, furniture, and brightly colored woven cloth, called kente. Although the Ashanti maintained traditional beliefs, Muslim traders and Christian missionaries won some converts among them to their respective religions.

During the 19th century, the Ashanti fought several wars with the British, who sought to eliminate the slave trade and expand their control in the region. A series of defeats at the hands of the British gradually weakened and reduced the territory of the Ashanti kingdom. After nearly a century of resistance to British power, the Ashanti kingdom was finally declared a Crown Colony in 1902 following the uprising known as the Yaa Asantewa War.

Before long, however, the Ashanti reemerged to contribute to the nationalist movement that would help shape modern Ghana. The exiled Ashanti king was allowed to return to Kumasi in 1924, and the British recognized the Ashanti Confederacy as a political entity in 1935. Today, most Ashanti live in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. They are primarily farmers, growing cocoa for export and yams, plantains, and other produce for local consumption. The Golden Stool, the Ashanti imperial palace, and artifacts at the Museum of National Culture in Kumasi have become enduring symbols of Ghana's illustrious past.

Wonders: Dahomey Kingdom

Dahomey, a precolonial West African kingdom, is located in what is now southern Benin. Dahomey reached the height of its power and prestige during the heyday of the Atlantic slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. Abomey, Dahomey's capital, was founded around 1620 by Dogbari, who fled Allada after a power struggle amongst his brothers for the control of that kingdom. Under the rule of Dogbari and his descendants, Abomey was expanded through military conquest and consolidated into a powerful state, and Dahomey became heavily involved in the European slave trade, which had begun in earnest a century previous with the arrival of the Dutch.

The rule of Gezu (1818-1858), who overthrew King Adandozan, marked the pinnacle of Dahomey's power and influence. However, the end of the slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century greatly affected the economic fortunes of Dahomey, forcing it to provide primary products for newly important colonial markets. Palm oil, its main export, was never able to generate the same kind of revenues the slave trade had yielded. After the French gained control of Porto-Novo, commerce declined. In 1892 the French launched a full-scale offensive against Dahomey. Dahomey leaders surrendered in 1894, and the kingdom became a French colony.



Cultural Close-Up: Gbeto Female Warriors

The Gbeto warriors were a terrifying group of female soldiers from the Dahomey Kingdom during the 1700s and 1800s. The Gbeto served as the king's official bodyguards and were known for their ruthlessness -- they ate raw meat, filed their teeth into sharp points and kept the jawbones and skulls of their enemies as trophies -- and European travelers referred to them as Amazonians. Armed with muskets and other weapons, they defended the Dahomey kingdom aptly, fighting in battles against the French, the Oyo, Ouidah, the Ashanti and others.

Today, young descendants of the Gbeto warriors serve as the king's ceremonial bodyguards. The preadolescent girls dance at the king's court, wielding play swords and axes and singing tales of their ancestors' bloody conquests.

Cultural Close-Up: Kente Cloth

Much more than just an ordinary fabric, kente cloth has been worn by Ashanti kings, queens, and important figures of state in Ghana since the 12th century and has evolved into the prime representative of many principals of African culture. Now made from cotton or silk, the first cloth was woven from raffia fibers, and the designs were so similar to basket weaving patterns that the cloth was given the name "kente," a derivative of "kenten," the Ashanti word for basket.

Today, over 300 different types of kente cloth are recognized, and the fabric is available in a variety of colors, sizes, and designs, all of which symbolize numerous aspects of social and cultural life. Women tend to wear two or three pieces of kente wrapped around the body with a matching blouse, and men usually wrap one large piece around their body and left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder and arm uncovered.

With the onset of modern living and social changes in Africa, there have been significant changes in how kente cloth is used. According to Ashanti tradition, the size and design of one's cloth varies according to gender, age, marital status, and social standing. However, in contemporary society, these guidelines are often ignored and kente attire is regularly chosen according to personal preference. Still, color and pattern symbolism linger as part of modern kente cloth apparel: patterns with a predominately yellow design symbolize royalty, wealth, and fertility; pink represents femininity, calmness, and sweetness; green indicates growth, fruitfulness, and spiritual rejuvenation; red, the color of blood, is associated with heightened spiritual and political mood, sacrifice and struggle; blue signifies spirituality and peace; and purple and maroon represent the healing power of the Earth. The most important color, which is used in most kente patterns and is representative of maturity, energy, antiquity, and spiritual potency, is black.

