Mr. Dowling's study sheet on Ancient Africa

A Great Oral Tradition

The European colonial powers called Africa "the Dark Continent" when they began their explorations. They saw it as a vast and dangerous place filled with savage people, but Africa has been home to many advanced, exotic civilizations. Many have been buried beneath the sands of time, but we know of others, and archaeologists continue to uncover more clues about ancient African civilizations.

West Africa has a great oral tradition. A *griot* is a learned storyteller, entertainer, and historian. Often a griot will memorize the genealogy, or family history, of everyone in a village going back centuries. American writer Alex Haley met a griot in 1966 that had memorized the entire story of the village of Juffure to a date two centuries in the past when his ancestor was enslaved.

Alex Haley

> *"The old griot had talked for nearly two hours up to then . . .* 'the oldest of these fours sons, Kunta, went away from his village and he was never seen again' *. . . I sat as if I were carved of stone. My blood seemed to have congealed. This man whose lifetime had been in this back-country African village had no way in the world to know that he had just echoed what I had heard all through my boyhood years on my grandma's front porch in Henning, Tennessee."*[1]

A great deal of what we know about West Africa comes from the griots, but archaeologists are often surprised by new finds. In the last fifteen years, scholars have concluded that civilization had developed in West Africa as much as one thousand years earlier than expected. We now know that Africa had an Iron Age culture with cities and trade routes about 250 years Before the Common Era.

The Nok

In 1928, archaeologists unearthed artifacts from an amazing culture that flourished from about 500BC to AD200. The archaeologists referred to the ancient culture as the Nok, the name of a modern Nigerian village where they made their discovery.

The Nok artifacts included sculptures animal and people made of terra cotta, or fired clay. The sophistication of the Nok sculptures appear to be based on woodcarvings, but artifacts made that long ago from wood would not have survived this long in the climate of West Africa. This leads archaeologists to believe that the civilization may have been much older than the oldest artifact.

The ancient Nok uncovered the mysteries of iron. Iron is a metal found in rocks. The Nok discovered that by heating certain rocks, they were able to "smelt" iron. Iron is a very useful substance. Iron is very malleable; it can be reshaped to make weapons and plows. Iron conducts heat very well and can be used for cooking and heating. Most ancient cultures discovered copper and bronze before iron, but the Nok apparently moved from the Stone Age to the Iron Age.

The Phoenicians and Carthage

The Phoenicians came from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea in land we now call Lebanon. Their land was arid and inhospitable for farming, so they turned to the sea to become the greatest travelers and traders of their time. The Phoenicians invented the alphabet, and taught several cultures their advanced system of writing.

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[1] Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, Dell, 1976. Page 719.

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The Phoenicians extended their influence across North Africa and settled Carthage in the modern nation of Tunisia, as a trading post. The word Carthage means "new city". The Phoenicians chose Carthage because of its location in the center of North Africa, a short distance away from Sicily and the Italian Peninsula. When the Assyrians and the Persians conquered the original homeland of the Phoenicians, Carthage became an independent state.

It was against a rival city in Italy, Rome, that Carthage fought and lost three brutal wars that eventually destroyed the city. The wars were known as the Punic Wars because Puncia was the Roman name for Carthage. The Roman navy surprised the sea trading people in the first war in 238BC. The Carthaginians acquired a new base in Spain from which a great military leader named Hannibal led a team of elephants across southern France and into Italy. Hannibal won some early victories but his forces were outnumbered, allowing Rome to win an even more brutal war lasting almost fifteen years until 204BC.

Carthage lost all political and military power by the end of the second Punic War, but the Romans moved a half-century later to destroy the city. After a siege in 146BC, the Romans went from house to house slaughtering the Carthaginians. The few survivors were sold into slavery, the city and harbor were destroyed, and the Romans poured salt over the farmland to ensure its barrenness.

The people south of the Sahara Desert had little contact with the rest of the world.

- The Sahara Desert is hot and dry. It was almost impossible to cross without modern transportation.
- The few rivers that flow from sub-Saharan Africa contain many high waterfalls that make travel difficult.
- Both the sub-Saharan Africans and the people north of the desert were fearful of venturing into the ocean.
- The tsetse flies that live on the edge of the desert carry deadly diseases.

Trade

The civilizations that flourished in ancient West Africa were all based on trade, so successful West African leaders tended to be conciliators rather than warriors. Caravans from North Africa crossed the Sahara beginning in the seventh century of the Common Era. Gold from West Africa was exchanged for something the West Africans prized even more: salt. Salt was used as a flavoring, a food preservative, and for retaining body moisture.

The first people to make the trek across the desert were the Berbers of North Africa, who brought their strict Islamic faith across the Sahara. The Berbers converted many of the merchants of West Africa to Islam, but most of the common people retained their traditional beliefs. The ancient West Africans, like Native Americans and the Sumerians, believed that many gods existed in nature. They did not accept the Muslim belief in one god.

Inland African Trade Routes

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Merchants and traders in West Africa saw many advantages in converting to Islam

- Literacy spread because belief in Islam encourages Muslims to learn the Quran.
- Many Muslims speak the language of the Quran. In time, Arabic became the common language of the merchants and traders of West Africa.
- Strict Muslims follow Islamic law. It is easier to solve disputes when both parties agree on the laws.
- Conversion to Islam opened up markets across North Africa and in Arabia.

Ghana

An ancient African civilization we call Ghana existed in West Africa between the Niger and the Senegal Rivers from about AD300 to about 1100. The rivers were important to Ghana because its economy was based on trade, and before the modern age, rivers were the fastest way to carry goods. Ghana became wealthy by collecting taxes from traders who passed through the kingdom. The people called their nation Wagadu; we know it as Ghana because that was the name of their war chief.

Ghana managed the gold trade despite the fact that the empire had few natural resources of its own. The gold and salt mines all lay beyond the borders of the empire, but the power of Ghana was based on the superior skill of their people in working with iron. Ghana used iron tipped spears to subdue the neighbors, who fought with less efficient weapons made of stone, bone, and wood.

Muslim warriors known as the Almoravids called a *jihad* ("struggle" in Arabic) on Ghana because the people of Ghana kept their traditional beliefs. The Almoravids were successful in weakening Ghana, but they but not destroying the empire. Ghana remained a shadow of itself for more than a century, and warriors from throughout the region formed many small states that threatened the vital trade routes through West Africa.

Sundiata

The griots of West Africa still tell the story of Sundiata, the sickly young boy who, in the thirteenth century, grew up to become a great warrior who expelled a brutal warrior and united the Mandinka people.

Samanguru was a tyrant who ruled the small state of Kaniaga, but he managed to conquer a great deal of West Africa once Ghana was weakened. Samanguru was hostile to the Mandinka people who lived in the region. His taxes were high, he felt it was his privilege to carry off Mandinka women, and he failed to maintain law and order along the trade routes.

Sundiata was one of twelve brothers who were the children of a Mandinka warrior. Samanguru killed the twelve brothers, but spared Sundiata because he believed the boy would die anyway. That mistake would lead to Samanguru's downfall. The sickly boy recovered and eventually assembled an army to confront Samanguru. Sundiata's forces killed Samanguru and destroyed his forces in the Battle of Kirina in 1235. Sundiata then became mansa, or king, of a new empire that we know today as Mali, or "where the king resides."

Sundiata proved himself a great warrior, but he was only interested in once again making West Africa a safe place to travel and trade. He converted to Islam, but only as a gesture of goodwill to the merchants and traders. To his own people, Sundiata presented himself as a champion of traditional West African religion.

Mansa Musa

Mansa Musa captured the attention of the Arab world when he left his home in the West African kingdom of Mali to make a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. Unlike his grandfather Sundiata, Mansa Musa was a devout Muslim. Islamic law requires that all faithful Muslims make a *hajj* (pilgrimage), or holy visit, to the city on the Arabian Peninsula where the faith was started.

Mansa Musa was a very rich king. He was said to have taken more than 500

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people with him on the hajj, each carrying a staff of solid gold. When Mansa Musa passed through Cairo, he gave away so much gold that the price of it fell and the economy was affected for more than twenty years. The appearance of a wealthy king from a faraway land made a deep impression on the people hoe encountered, causing Mali to appear on maps throughout the Middle East and Europe. Sub-Saharan Africa became well known north of the Sahara Desert for the first time.

The kingdom of Mali eventually weakened and the neighboring kingdom of Songhai developed into the last black of pre-colonial West Africa. Songhai was destroyed after a bloody war with Morocco. Morocco's sultan wanted West African gold, so in 1590, he sent an army of 3000 men south across the Sahara Desert. The spears and lances of the Songhai warriors were no match for the cannons and muskets of the Moroccan army, but the fighting continued long after the Songhai government had been destroyed. The bloody war continued for more than ten years. Eventually, the Sultan lost interest and abandoned his army in Songhai. The Moroccan soldiers were either killed or absorbed into the local population. The Moroccan invasion destroyed Songhai, and with it the trade routes that had brought prosperity to the region for hundreds of years.

Timbuktu

No name brings ancient Africa to mind more than Timbuktu, a great city that flourished for more than on a bend in the Niger River four hundred years. Timbuktu was at the end of the camel caravan route that linked sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa and Arabia. Gold, ivory, and kola nuts passed through Timbuktu, but the most important commodity was salt. Timbuktu was located near several salt mines. Caravans hauled salt from nearby mines to trade for gold

Timbuktu began as a trading city, but in time the developed into the intellectual and spiritual center of West Africa. By 1330, Timbuktu became part of the kingdom of Mali. Mansa Musa built a great mosque, or Islamic temple, in Timbuktu. The mosque attracted scholars from as far away as Saudi Arabia.

Timbuktu began to decline in influence when the Portuguese showed that it was easier to sail around the coast of Africa than travel through the desert. The city was destroyed at the end of the sixteenth century by the war between Morocco and Songhai. At one time, historians estimate that more than 100,000 people lived in Timbuktu, but today it remains a shadow of its former self, a mud-built town of 20,000 people on the edge of the Sahara Desert.

Zimbabwe

The Karanga people ruled a great inland African empire from about AD1000 to 1600. The Karanga were traders and sailors who smelted gold and traded it on the shores of the Indian Ocean for glass beads and porcelain from as far away as China. European explorers discovered vast stone ruins of the Karanga in 1867. The site of the ruins was called Zimbabwe, which means "stone dwelling" in the native Bantu language.

The ruins seem to have been the spiritual and religious center of the city of perhaps as many as 20,000 people. The sixty-acre site is situated atop a high plateau. Its builders used granite and other stones to form walls up to thirty-six feet high and twenty feet thick. Evidence suggests that the structure was built in the tenth century and abandoned about five hundred years later.

The Europeans were unwilling to believe that sub-Saharan Africans could have built anything as grand as Zimbabwe; they theorized that ancient Phoenicians, Arabs, Romans, or Hebrews created the structures. British curator Richard Hall, who destroyed portions of the site in an unsuccessful attempt to prove that it had been built by a foreign civilization. Later excavations in by archaeologists David Randall-MacIver and Gertrude Caton-Thompson proved that the Africans created the ruins.

The white colonial government of Rhodesia attempted to deny the Great Zimbabwe's African origin. The leaders of Rhodesia argued the land was empty of people and culture before they arrived. When the government allowed people of all races to vote in 1980, the black majority Rhodesia discarded their colonial name and, looking to the past for nobler origins, chose to rename their nation Zimbabwe.

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