

CHAPTER

3



Mt. Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak, rises in Eastern Africa. In the same region lie the Great Lakes and the Great Rift Valley, where scientists believe the ancestors of all human beings originally lived.

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Africa

Chapter Outline

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Quick Write

How do you think this knowledge about the origins of modern humans affects the way most people think about Africa? How does it make you think about Africa?



Learn About

- the five major regions of Africa
- the natural resources of Africa
- the distinctive characteristics of African culture
- the main ethno-linguistic groups in Africa
- the main language groups in Africa
- how Islam, Christianity, and indigenous religions influence Africa

In this lesson you will read about Africa's tradition of extended families. But before you do, take a few moments to think about the biggest extended family of all—the human race.

In 1925 a scientist named Raymond Dart found a fossil in a cave in South Africa. The fossil was what remained of the skull of a six-year-old creature. It looked like an ape but had some human characteristics. It had lived millions of years before.

Scientists have been hot on the trail of human evolution ever since. Many of their most significant finds have been in the Great Rift Valley of Eastern and Southern Africa.

That's where modern human beings evolved, somewhere between 90,000 and 130,000 years ago. These people belonged to the Early Stone Age. But they had the same capacity to think as people today do. They were the fathers and mothers of all humanity.

"There is no question that Africans contributed towards the development of human beings as we know them today," George Abungu, of the National Museums of Kenya, told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). "They were the first to use their physical capabilities to enlarge their brains."

"They were able to develop the technology of stone tools. They were the first ones to move out of trees and walk upright and they were the first ones to explore crossing the seas and going out to Asia and Europe . . . and to me this is the greatest achievement that humanity has ever done."

The Five Major Regions of Africa

Africa is the world's second-largest and second-most populous continent. Only Asia is bigger and has more people. The United Nations divides Africa into five major regions: North, West, Central, Eastern, and Southern.

Vocabulary



- equatorial
- savanna
- fissionable
- irrigate
- faction
- polygamy
- griot
- ethno-linguistic group
- sub-Saharan Africa
- linguist
- indigenous



A topographical map of Africa



A political map of Africa

North Africa

This designation covers Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Western Sahara. These countries are all waterfront properties, with seacoast along the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, or the Red Sea. Parts of the region are quite mountainous. The Atlas Mountains follow Africa's northwestern "shoulder." But if you think of the area as a whole as largely desert, you'd be correct, too.

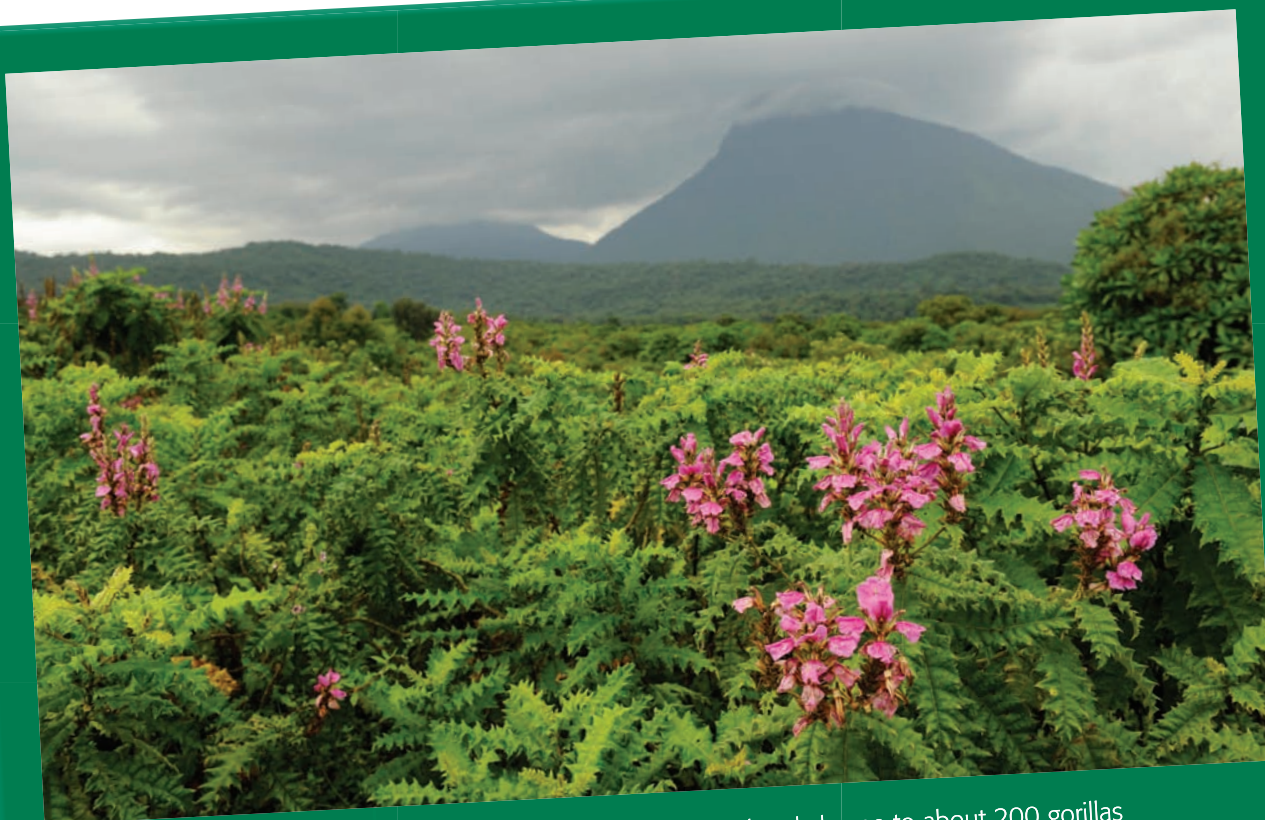
Except for areas right on the coasts, almost all of North Africa is desert: the Sahara Desert is the largest hot desert in the world.

West Africa

West Africa consists of Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo, plus the island nation of Cape Verde. These countries are largely **equatorial** jungle. Equatorial means *set along the equator*. The Senegal and the Niger are this area's important rivers.

Central Africa

Equatorial jungle also describes the countries of Central Africa. They are Angola, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Gabon. Two other island nations belong to Central Africa: Equatorial Guinea plus Sao Tome and Principe. The latter are two islands in the Gulf of Guinea. Together they make up one country. The Congo is Central Africa's main river.



Mikeno Mountain (on the right) looks out over Virunga National Park, home to about 200 gorillas in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Photo by Mary Knox Merrill / © 2009 The Christian Science Monitor

Jungles flourish in West Africa, Central Africa, and Eastern Africa.

Eastern Africa

The countries of the Eastern African mainland are Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The big island of Madagascar is also part of Eastern Africa, as are two island chains, the Comoros and Seychelles.

Much of Eastern Africa is highlands. This area is also Africa's "Great Lakes" region. Lake Victoria, Lake Tanganyika, and Lake Nyasa are all here. The mighty Nile has its source in Eastern Africa. It flows north from here to Egypt and the Mediterranean. The Zambezi River, in Mozambique, is another important river of this region. Mt. Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak at 19,330 feet, is in Tanzania. This region's lowlands are largely jungle.

Southern Africa

Southern Africa consists of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Swaziland. Its typical landscape is the **savanna**—*a flat grassland of tropical or subtropical regions*. The region has some mountain ranges and is also home to the Kalahari Desert.

The Natural Resources of Africa

Africa has many significant minerals. But sometimes, as you will read below, they have led to conflict rather than wealth. African farmers, meanwhile, face enormous challenges. Experts believe that better farming practices will lead to more prosperity in Africa.

Mineral Resources

Africa accounted for 53 percent of the world's diamond production in 2006. Botswana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Africa, and Angola were the top four producers.

Africa is also a big gold producer. It accounted for 21 percent of world production in 2006. South Africa was far and away the leader, followed by Ghana, Mali, and Tanzania.

Africa is a leading producer of other minerals as well. These glitter less than gold and diamonds but are critical to today's high-tech industries:

- **Chromite** is used to produce steel, copper, glass, and cement. People use chromium, mined from chromite, in pigments (paints), photography, and plating (a process used to coat something in a thin metal layer). South Africa is the world's leading producer.



Workers do hot strip molding at a steel works in South Africa.

Photo by Neal J. Menschel / © 1990 The Christian Science Monitor

The African continent is rich with natural resources, including manganese used in steelmaking.

- **Cobalt** is used to make industrial alloys (a mixture of metals) and high-performance cutting tools. People also use it to color porcelain and other substances. It has medical uses as well. Africa—mostly the DRC and Zambia—accounted for nearly 60 percent of the world's cobalt production in 2006.
- **Manganese** is used in steelmaking. South Africa and Gabon are Africa's leading producers of this metal. The world gets about a third of its manganese from Africa.
- **Uranium** is **fissionable**. That is, its atoms *can be split to make nuclear explosions*. People around the world use controlled nuclear explosions to create electricity. They also use uranium to build nuclear bombs. Africa accounts for about one-fifth of the world's uranium production. Almost all of that is from Nigeria and Niger.

Three big African countries also have significant oil resources: Nigeria, Angola, and Sudan.

Agricultural Resources

Africa's farmers have a tough row to hoe. They're unable to feed their own people. Since 1973 Africa has been a net importer of food. That is, what Africans must buy from others is more than what they can grow and sell on the market. The number of chronically hungry Africans (in other words, people who are hungry most of the time) approaches 200 million—about 20 to 25 percent of the total population.

The good news here, though, is that the World Bank, the United Nations, and other organizations are identifying ways to improve African agriculture. From 1981 to 2001, aid to Africa, adjusted for inflation, declined by about half. Since then, though, aid has bounced back. Many people, in Africa and outside it, are making a renewed effort to pull Africans out of poverty. Observers believe that improving agriculture, including farmers' incomes, is the best way to do this. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is the main plan behind this effort. NEPAD stresses that "agriculture will provide the engine for growth in Africa."

Most African farmers are *subsistence* farmers—that is, they farm to feed themselves. Most own small plots of one to five acres of land. Women provide about half the labor, and they grow most of the food crops that their families eat.



A Kenyan woman tends to her farm daily, despite dangers due to tribal tensions.

Photo by Melanie Stetson Freeman / © 2008 The Christian Science Monitor

Most African farmers are subsistence farmers—that is, they farm to feed themselves.

Africans must work with poor soil, widely varying amounts of rain, and frequent droughts. They have a hard time getting their crops to market. They don't have access to railroads and trucking companies like the ones American farmers rely on to haul their output to the cities. Many African farmers are unable to irrigate—water—their fields. They don't have access to credit. That is, they can't borrow money to even out their cash flow over the growing cycle, as American farmers commonly do.

African farmers cope with all these challenges by diversifying. Even on their small plots, they grow many different crops, typically 10 or more. They also grow trees and keep livestock. And they rely heavily on hardy crops—grains such as sorghum and millet, and root crops such as cassava.

Note that these are different from the cereals (rice and wheat) that have been so important to Asia's Green Revolution. Experts say that if African farm output has grown, it's because Africans have planted more land. When Asians' farm output has grown, it's been because their crop yields have been better.

Conflicts Over Resources

As you may have noticed in reading about the Middle East, natural resources are sometimes a mixed blessing to a country. This is true in Africa, too. Controversy rages over who “owns” natural resources, and who should benefit from their development.

Those questions can be hard enough to answer. It all becomes more complicated when resource wealth fuels conflict. This has happened in many African countries in recent years: Angola, the DRC, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.

In cases of civil war, one faction, or group, gains illegal control over a resource and uses the money it earns to supply its troops so it can keep fighting. Factional leaders also tap resources illegally to make themselves rich and to gain wealth they can use to “buy” political support.

In Sierra Leone in the 1990s, for instance, a rebel group called the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) forced prisoners of war and others, including children as young as age 8, to dig for diamonds at gunpoint. The diamonds were sold to buyers in nearby Liberia and Guinea, and then resold in the world diamond centers in London and Antwerp, Belgium. The RUF financed its rebellion with the money it got from diamond sales. The group had no real political goals—there was nothing it was fighting for. Its leaders were eventually convicted of crimes against humanity.

Diamonds may be the best-known resource exploited in this way. But illegal sales of oil and timber have also fueled conflict in Africa. The United Nations and other organizations have begun to focus on the links between natural resources and conflict. They are moving to address the problem.

The Distinctive Characteristics of African Culture

Africa's greatest resource is its people and their cultures. Three aspects of African culture are worth examining here: the extended family, the widespread tradition of multiple marriages, and Africa's great storytelling tradition.

The Influence of Extended Families

A strong system of extended families is an essential part of traditional African cultures. Within this tradition, the group is what counts, not the individual. And it's often a very large group. In an African extended family, many people will have a say in how a couple's children should be raised, or where they should go to school, or what careers they should pursue. Not just parents but grandparents and aunts and uncles will have a voice in these decisions. This attitude is summed up in the African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child."

If a father has more than one wife, his children may need to obey not only their mother but their stepmothers—their father's other wives. If a young man has a young woman in mind for his bride, his aunts are likely to "check her out" before the marriage goes forward. By contrast, within the "modern" way of doing things, imported from the West, the individual makes his or her own decisions.

The movement of people to cities is challenging the influence of extended families in Africa. When young people leave their home villages for the cities, they naturally make new friends. They may form these new ties without regard to the social structures they knew at home. They often find their lives revolve around their identities on the job. They make friends at work. And those relationships are likely to cut across family and other traditional ties. They are likely to meet and marry someone whom their relatives don't get a chance to check out, as they would do in the countryside.

On the other hand, many young Africans go to the city and discover their clan is already there. When they first arrive, they are identified according to their family tree and "placed." They typically join a clan-based welfare organization complete with an emergency fund. They know someone is there to help with medical bills in case of serious illness, for instance.

Extended families remain important, whatever stress the system is under. In the absence of Western-style old-age and health insurance, the extended family is an important social safety net. The traditions of the extended family help absorb the shocks of war, disease, and other upheavals.

Africa's system of extended families has helped soften the devastating blow of the AIDS epidemic. This epidemic has affected Africa perhaps more than any other continent. AIDS tends to affect people in their prime earning and child-rearing years, and so it generally creates a lot of orphans. In traditional African culture,

however, they don't stay orphans for long. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles step in to raise children. That said, though, so many families have been ravaged by AIDS that there sometimes are no other branches left. And many older grandparents who might otherwise step in to help are themselves already facing dire poverty because of the extended family's breakdown.

Polygamy's Impact

Polygamy means *having more than one spouse at a time*. It is still a fairly common practice in Africa. Having more than one wife at a time is common in largely Muslim parts of Africa. A 2005 survey in Senegal, for instance, found that half of all marriages there were polygamous. Many Muslim men feel that their religion allows them to take up to four wives. But more and more, African women in Muslim countries are deciding they don't want to be wife No. 2 or 3 or 4. Besides, readers of the Koran point out that although this text does allow a man to take more than one wife, to do so he must be able to afford and to treat all equally—a very tall order.

Although polygamy is widespread in Africa—and not just among Muslims—it's been controversial for a long time. European colonial rulers discouraged it. Some modern African leaders, on the other hand—notably President Umar Hassan al-Bashir of Sudan—have encouraged polygamy as a way to increase population.



This Darfur refugee found shelter in Chad with his three wives and 20 children, some of whom are shown here.

Photo by Melanie Stetson Freeman / © 2007 The Christian Science Monitor

Having more than one wife at a time is common in largely Muslim parts of Africa.

Christianity, South Africa's leading religion, forbids polygamy. But Jacob Zuma, the country's third president since the end of white rule in South Africa, openly favors multiple marriages and has several wives. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the country's most prominent religious leader, has denounced Zuma as a "Zulu peasant" who was "unfit to be president."

A 2009 phone survey of 2,000 South Africans found that 74 percent of respondents objected to polygamy. Attitudes varied widely by race and sex, however.

Even some African men who have practiced polygamy have had second thoughts. In 2005 the BBC interviewed a 56-year-old Ethiopian whose 11 wives had borne him 100 children, 23 of whom had died. As for the rest, he had trouble remembering their names. He had wanted many wives in the first place as a way to share his wealth. But things didn't turn out the way he had hoped. "I want my children to be farmers, but I have no land. I want them to go to school, but I have no money."

The Significance of Oral Tradition

But polygamy is only one characteristic of African culture. Africa is a continent of storytellers. It's a place where oral tradition—language that is spoken rather than written—counts for much. Africans today are still primarily oral people. In fact, the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o came up with the term "orature" to describe the "oral literature" of Africa.

Africans compose and share orature without writing anything down. There's no writer with a pen and paper or typewriter or computer. And African stories are more of a group activity than an individual one. "Writers" often create stories for groups to perform as part of a presentation of music and dancing.

The **griot** is an important figure in Africa. A griot is *an African storyteller, especially one from West Africa*. He is a kind of walking encyclopedia, or walking community library. The griot (it's pronounced GREE-o, and it's rooted in the idea of "someone who creates") carries in his head the whole history of a community. His stories are meant to entertain, to help people make sense of the world, and to impart wisdom and traditional morals to his listeners.

Rather like jazz musicians, griots improvise. They don't tell the same story the same way each time. There's no single "correct" version of a story. Rather, griots go back and forth between a memorized text and improvisation. They adapt their story to their audience and to what's going on in the community or the world. If a story becomes irrelevant because of changes in the larger culture, the griots will modify it. Or they may just drop it and replace it with something else. That's how new stories are born.

African languages are less standardized than major Western languages like English or French. A village may share a language with another village just up the road—but may speak it just a bit differently. These language differences mean stories are told slightly differently.



These hairdressers take one to two days to braid a person's hair at their informal outdoor shop in Burundi, in Eastern Africa.

Photo by Melanie Stetson Freeman / © 2006 The Christian Science Monitor

Black Africans are by far the majority of the population of Africa.

The Main Ethno-Linguistic Groups in Africa

A group of people who all grow up with the same body of stories from the same village griot would tend to look at things in a similar way. That body of stories is an expression of ethno-linguistic identity. An **ethno-linguistic group** is a group of people who share a common language and culture. This means they also share a common view of the world and life in general.

Africans

Black Africans are the original inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa. (**Sub-Saharan Africa** is that part of Africa south of the Sahara Desert.) In fact, scientists believe that modern human beings came from the Rift Valley in Eastern Africa. Black Africans are by far the majority of the population of Africa. They are divided into four main language groups: Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan. You will read about them later in this lesson.

Arabs and Berbers

The Arabs and Berbers live mostly in North Africa. Some Arabic influence is also noticeable on the east coast, however. Much lighter-skinned than the people of sub-Saharan Africa, they have often been referred to by Europeans as “black.” Maybe that’s how they looked to the fair-skinned peoples of Europe, especially northern Europe. Another term for the Arabs and Berbers of North Africa is “Moors.” The Moors conquered Spain in the eighth century. Shakespeare’s tragedy *Othello* is about a Moor in Venice, Italy.

As you read in Chapter 1, Lesson 1, the Arabs originated on the Arabian Peninsula and eventually spread out to North Africa and other places. The Berbers, on the other hand, are the original inhabitants of North Africa west of Egypt. They came under the influence of the Arabs when the Arabs arrived.

fastFACT

St. Augustine has proven to be one of the most important and influential Christians since Bible times. Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox Christians still read his books, *The Confessions*—one of the first autobiographies—and *City of God*.

Arabs speak Arabic. Berbers have their own Berber language, spoken by 14 million to 25 million people. Both groups are predominantly Muslim. Two of the most famous Berbers were not, however: the Roman Emperor Severus Septimus and St. Augustine, Christian Bishop of Hippo (354–430).



North Africans in their traditional attire mix with tourists in Tunisia, Tunisia.
Photo by R. Norman Matheny / © 1992 The Christian Science Monitor

The Arabs and Berbers of North Africa are much lighter-skinned than the people of sub-Saharan Africa.



White South Africans picnic at a concert at Cape Town's Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens.

Photo by Melanie Stetson Freeman / © 2002
The Christian Science Monitor

Whites make up about 10 percent of South Africa's 48 million people.

Afrikaners and Other Europeans

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dutch, German, and French Protestant farmers settled in what is now South Africa. Their descendants are known as Afrikaners. They number about 3 million. Together with people of British descent, they make up about 10 percent of South Africa's 48 million people. This group, which speaks Afrikaans and English, is the largest white population in sub-Saharan Africa. All these Europeans, if they are religious, tend to follow the Protestant or Roman Catholic faiths of their ancestral homelands. South Africa has a significant Jewish community as well.

fastFACT

Afrikaans is an Indo-European language that evolved from Dutch among the people who became Afrikaners and coloured (mixed race) in South Africa. More than 6 million people speak it.

People of Mixed Race and Asians

Colored is a term that went out of favor in the United States decades ago as a way to refer to blacks. But in South Africa, *coloured* (with a "u") is the proper way to refer to people of mixed race. They make up about 9 percent of the population. They are generally of mixed African and European background. Some have Asian ancestry as well. Most speak Afrikaans.

In Africa, *Asians* usually refers to people from the Indian subcontinent brought to Africa to work on British-owned plantations. They make up 2.5 percent of South Africa's population. Small groups of Asians live in former British colonies elsewhere in East Africa, such as Kenya. They generally follow the traditional religions their ancestors practiced in South Asia. South and Eastern Africa also have small Chinese communities.

The Main Language Groups in Africa

With its variety of ethno-linguistic groups, it's no surprise that Africa has more languages spoken than any other continent—about 2,000. Most of these have very small numbers of speakers. Only about 50 have half a million speakers or more.

Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan

The American linguist Joseph H. Greenberg (1915–2001) was the first to classify the languages of Africa. (A **linguist** is *someone who studies languages*.) He grouped them into four major families.

The Niger-Congo Family

This group consists of more than 1,400 languages. Together they have between 300 million and 400 million speakers. The Atlantic-Congo branch is the biggest of three branches in this family. Its territory stretches across almost all of sub-Saharan Africa. It includes the Bantu group of languages. Swahili, one of the most widely spoken in a geographic sense, is part of this group. So is Shona, the majority language of Zimbabwe.

By contrast, people speak the Kordofanian-branch languages in only a small area of southern Sudan. And they speak the languages of the Mande branch in West Africa.

The Afro-Asiatic Family

Between 200 million and 300 million people in northern Africa, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea speak these languages. The area around Lake Chad in central Africa is also home to speakers of a group of these languages. The vocabulary of all these tongues—about 350 in all—reflects the life and livelihoods of the people who speak them. That is, they raise and herd livestock and grow food crops. These languages, including the Berber languages touched on earlier in this lesson, have all grown from a language called “ancestral Semitic.” This is a sort of “grandfather” language of Arabic and Hebrew as well. This makes today's Afro-Asiatic languages “cousins” of those tongues spoken in the Middle East.

The Nilo-Saharan Family

This is a smaller group, in terms of numbers of speakers—18 million to 30 million. Its languages are so diverse that not everyone agrees that they really belong together as one family. People speak in these languages in the eastern Sahara and the upper Nile Valley. (That is the southern part of the valley because the Nile flows north.) The DRC and the areas around Lake Victoria in east Central Africa are also home to speakers of Nilo-Saharan tongues.

The Khoisan Family

The smallest family of African languages is the Khoisan. There are only about 30 languages in this group, with only about 200,000 speakers altogether. The Khoikhoi and San peoples of Southern Africa account for most of these. The Khoisan language with the most speakers is Nama. People speak it in Namibia and South Africa. Sandawe and Hadza, two other languages in this family, are spoken well to the north, in Tanzania.

The Khoisan languages include “click” consonants, made by clicking or clucking the tongue. Almost every word begins with a click in some of these languages, and there are several different kinds of clicks. One special click is made by pressing the lips together and releasing them by sucking in air. The sound that’s made may remind you of the sound of a kiss!

The Roles of European and Asian Languages

Many Africans speak more than one African language. They also often speak one or more European languages, especially if they have a college degree. These include English, French, Afrikaans, Portuguese, and German.

In countries with many different **indigenous**—*native*—languages, no one tongue is dominant. None has enough speakers to unify the country. And so this role often falls to the “neutral” language of the former colonial power instead.

Most of Africa’s South Asians speak English. But some retain their ancestral languages. As evidence of this, the South African Constitution mentions several South Asian languages: Gujarati, Hindi, Tami, Telegu, and Urdu.

How Islam, Christianity, and Indigenous Religions Influence Africa

Africa is a lively spiritual marketplace. During the twentieth century, both Christianity and Islam grew rapidly on the continent. But traditional religions remain as well. Many Africans practice more than one religion.

Africa’s Major Religions: Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous

In 1900 Africa had just 10 million Christians, according to the religious scholar Philip Jenkins. This was about 9 percent of a total population of 107 million. Today about 46 percent of Africans are Christian. (Estimates of Africa’s total population range from 700 million to 1 billion.)

Jenkins expects to see the numbers rise because Africa’s Christian countries have high rates of population growth. He expects that by the year 2050, of the seven countries in the world with the largest numbers of Christians, three will be in Africa: Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ethiopia.



A mosque sits on a hill above busy Kampala, Uganda.
Photo by Mary Knox Merrill / © 2009 The Christian Science Monitor

Today the number of those practicing Islam across Africa is only slightly smaller than the number of Christians.

American and European missionaries were behind this growth. Their work also helped standardize native languages, by the way. Translators preferred to create one Bible for as large a group as they could, rather than a different one for every village. These missionaries also brought the Roman alphabet. This is the one used in English and other European languages. Originally, many significant African languages used Arabic script. But it wasn't always a good fit with the sounds of African languages. For instance, Arabic has only three vowels, and Swahili has five: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*. The Roman alphabet worked better to convey the sounds of Swahili.

Islam also grew during the twentieth century. By some reckonings, it attracted even more converts than Christianity. Today the numbers of those practicing Islam are only slightly smaller than for Christians. Muslims are concentrated in North Africa and northern West Africa and along the East African coast.

Oddly enough, European colonialism may have aided Islam's spread in Africa. First, during the colonial era European powers divided their territories artificially rather than paying attention to the natural boundaries between communities. Second, these rulers sometimes adopted Muslim law for these oddly shaped colonies. It provided a single standard that could be applied uniformly. This meant that they didn't have to sort through competing tribal customs.

Also, Christianity came to Africa largely through European colonizers. That made it unattractive to many Africans. Islam, on the other hand, did not have that history and so was more appealing to many.

Not all Christianity in Africa was “imported,” however. Africa has two ancient native churches that go back to the very early days of Christianity. They are the Coptic Christian Church in Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. And the Copts, by the way, speak a language related to the ancient Egyptian of the Pharaohs.

Despite the rise of Christianity and Islam in Africa, traditional religions are still important. Traditional religions still claim a majority of the population in several countries: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Zambia.

And of the three African countries that Philip Jenkins predicts will have some of the largest numbers of Christians in the world by the middle of the twenty-first century, all are currently, at least, “mixed,” with no one belief system claiming more than 50 percent of the population.

Unfortunately, the large numbers of Christians and Muslims living near each other in many African countries sometimes leads to conflicts. These are often as much ethnic conflicts as they are religious. In the Sudan, for example, the Muslim Arabs of the north and the Christian and traditional black Africans of the south have waged civil war off and on for many years. The black Africans accused the Muslim government of trying to impose Islam on them. The presence of oil reserves in traditionally African areas has complicated the situation.

In Nigeria, conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the country’s northern states have grown as Islamic fundamentalists and Wahhabists have pushed to implement Islamic law. They have tried to apply it to Christians and other non-Muslims as well as to Muslims. Nigeria’s many ethnic divisions often make the conflict worse.



Worshippers light candles at a Coptic Christian Church in Cairo, Egypt’s, Old City.

*Photo by Melanie Stetson Freeman /
© 1995 The Christian Science Monitor*

Africa has two ancient native churches that go back to the very early days of Christianity: the Coptic Christian Church in Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.



Distribution of belief systems in Africa, by country

Many African dictators, such as Isaias Afwerki in Eritrea, have persecuted Muslims as well as Christians, especially when they refused to do what the government demanded. Much of Africa's religious and ethnic conflict is the aftereffect of the colonial period, when European powers seized control of most of the continent and its resources. You'll read about that in the next lesson.



Lesson 1 Review

Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. What is the world's largest hot desert?
2. Where is Africa's Great Lakes region?
3. Why do development officials see agriculture as the “engine for growth” in Africa in the coming years?
4. How did Sierra Leone's RUF guerrillas get diamonds, and what did they do with them?
5. What specific role do a young man's aunts play in a traditional extended family in Africa?
6. How does the Koran limit the number of wives a man may take?
7. What ethno-linguistic group makes up the vast majority of Africa's population?
8. Who are the coloured people of South Africa?
9. What are Swahili and Shona?
10. What group of languages includes distinctive click noises?
11. Why has Christianity grown in Africa since 1900?
12. Where are Africa's Muslims concentrated?

Applying Your Learning

13. If you lived in Africa, what language or languages would you want to know? Why?