As we told you in our last Lesson, Africa is where mankind began. So African history goes back a lot further than other histories.

The first Africans were hunter-gatherers. But by 6000 BC the climate was turning hot and dry.

The Sahara Desert -- the world's largest desert -- was beginning to form.

So people moved out of the desert and began farming. Cotton, sorghum, watermelon, kola nuts and coffee are thought to have originated in Africa. Along with many edible food plants.

Farming eventually led to a number of magnificent African civilizations.

Which we know a lot about. Because of Africa's great oral tradition.

In Africa, there are storyteller-historians called griots. Who pass history down by word of mouth. From one generation to another. Much of what we know about African civilization originally came from griots.

Reinforced by archeologists and anthropologists.

**Egypt and Kush**

The first big African civilization was Egypt.

Their people called it Kemet, meaning "people of the black land". It emerged about 3300 BC.

But south of Egypt, along the Nile River, other civilizations were developing too.

Like Nubia. And Kush (present-day Sudan). Which arose about 3000 BC.

During much of its history, Kush was dominated by Egypt.

In fact, Egypt conquered it in 1550 BC. And ruled it for more than 500 years.

But when Egypt's New Kingdom collapsed around 1100 BC, Kush regained its independence. It extended its borders by conquering Nubia.
And then, in one of the great ironies of history, it turned around and conquered Egypt. Led by its great war hero, King Piankhi.

Kush ruled Egypt until the Assyrian invasion in the seventh century BC. Which forced the Kush people to look southward. And identify more with sub-Sahara Africa.

Especially when Axum replaced Kush as a trading center.

**Axum (Ethiopia)**

The Axum people were a mix of Kush-speaking people from Ethiopia and Semetic-speaking people from Arabia.

They settled in the Ethiopian highlands near the Red Sea. Right in the middle of the trade routes between Africa, Arabia and India. So they became fabulously rich.

Axum was a crossroads of cultures from Egypt. Sudan. Arabia. The Middle East. And India.

But in the fourth century AD, their ruler -- Ezana -- converted to Christianity. And made Axum a Christian state.

Axum remained a strong trading power until the rise of Islam in the seventh century AD. But in spite of its commercial decline, it continued to enjoy good relations with its Muslim neighbors. While retaining its Christian religion.

The Ethiopic (Abyssinian) Church is still active in Ethiopia today. In fact, many people believe that actual Ark of the Covenant resides in the St. Mary of Zion Chapel in Axum.

Remember the search for it in the movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark?"

To read more about this lost Ark, click on: [http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/735312/posts](http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/735312/posts)
The Bantu Migrations (& Iron)

Africans developed metallurgy very early.

About 1400 BC, East Africans began producing steel in carbon furnaces. (Europe didn't "discover" steel until the eighteenth century AD -- over 3000 years later.)

But the smelting of iron didn’t really spread throughout Africa until the first century AD. With the Bantu migrations.

Which involved hundreds of thousands of people. And lasted for over 1000 years.

The Bantu people originally lived along the Niger River in West Africa (in what are now Niger and Cameroon). By about 300 BC, due to population pressure, they began to spread throughout Africa.

They migrated south into the rain forests of the Congo. And east onto the highlands. Taking their metallurgy, language and agriculture with them. Including techniques for planting high-yield crops like yams, bananas and plantains.

Which led to an explosive growth in village life.

The Bantu would eventually found many civilizations. Including that of Great Zimbabwe. Which we’ll tell you about in a minute.

They also settled the seaports on Africa’s east coast. Where they traded ivory, gold, iron, furs and slaves. For cotton, silk, glass beads and Chinese porcelain.

Bantu-descended people include the Shona. The Xhosa. The Kikuyu. And the Zulu.

The Bantu language spread along with the people. And mixed with a number of Arab words to became Swahili. Which is spoken by 50 million people today.

Swahili is the main language of trade on the eastern coast of Africa.
Islam Comes to Africa

Islam came to Africa in the seventh century AD.

The religion of Islam was founded in 610 AD when Muhammad, its prophet, had a series of revelations. In a cave above Mecca (in today's Saudi Arabia).

After Muhammad died in 632 AD, his deputy (Abu Bakr) began a series of military conquests. Which spread the new faith around the world.

In 636, the Muslims occupied Jerusalem, Damascus and Antioch. By 651, they had conquered Persia. Then they moved west into Africa. And in 711 they entered Spain.

In just 100 years, Islam had spread throughout the Middle East, Persia, the Arabian Peninsula and northern Africa. And had entered Europe.

This was one of the most dramatic cultural changes in history.

Especially in Africa.

Where the Berbers, a fervent Muslim people from North Africa, invaded and converted many cities in an area south of the Sahara called the Sahel. Turning them into great centers of Islamic learning.

Because Islam brought more than a new religion to Africa. It brought literacy.

That's because Islam is a religion of the book (the Qur'an). So it spread reading and writing wherever it went. As well as the development of formal educational systems.

At one time, the city of Timbuktu (now in Mali) had perhaps the greatest university on earth.

An African-American scholar, Henry Louis Gates Jr. of Harvard, recently visited the Timbuktu University Library. For a television documentary called Wonders of the African World. To see the amazing things he found, click: http://www.pbs.org/wonders

Many Africans now dealt with two languages. Their native language and Arabic,
which was the language of the Qur’ran. In fact, Africans began to use the Arabic alphabet to write their own languages.

Which many still do today.

The Sahelian Kingdoms: Ghana, Mali, Songhay & Kanem-Bornu

Four major North African civilizations grew up in the Sahel, an area south of the Sahara. Thanks to the camel, "the ship of the desert."

The camel made trade across the desert possible. And it made Sahel rich.

The Sahelian Kingdoms were Ghana, Mali, Songhay and Kanem-Bornu.

Ghana

Ghana was the first, founded in the first century AD. It became the southern terminal of the Sahara trade. A trade that included salt, copper, slaves and gold.

Ghana rapidly expanded to become an empire.

But it was undone by the very people who founded it -- the Berbers. Who had become fervent Muslims, now calling themselves Almoravids.

Ghana had never converted to Islam, although Muslims had always been welcome at Court. So the Almoravids declared a holy war (jihad) against the government in 1075 AD.

Ghana fell to Mali (a Muslim state) in the 1200's AD.

Mali

Mali was the second great Sahelian Kingdom.

Its historical founder was Sunjata, a legendary magician who was originally a royal slave. In addition to unifying the country, he introduced farming and the cultivation and weaving of cotton.
Mali’s most significant king was Mansa Musa (1312-1337 AD). Who expanded Mali’s influence to the neighboring Niger city-states.

A devout Muslim and scholar, it was under his rule that Timbuktu became an important cultural center. A meeting place for the finest poets, scholars and artists of Africa and the Middle East.

After Mansa Musa’s death, Mali’s power declined. It was finally eclipsed by the Songhay Kingdom.

The Songhay Kingdom and Kanem-Bornu

The greatest ruler of the Songhay Kingdom was Askia Muhammad Toure. He expanded his empire by seizing important oases in the Sahara. And by conquering Mali.

He established an extensive and effective bureaucracy. He standardized weights, measures and currency. And appointed Arab Muslims to run his legal system.

Eventually, the Songhay empire stretched all the way to Cameroon.

It become the greatest empire in early Africa.

But it eventually got so large even its 35,000-man army couldn't control it.

The first part to go was Hausaland (now northern Nigeria). Maghred (Morocco) was next.

When Songhay fell, a kingdom called Kanem-Bornu grew to replace it.

The Forest Kingdoms

Other important African civilizations grew up in the forestlands of western Africa south of the Sahelian Kingdoms.

Originally, the people lived in small tribal villages ruled over by chiefs. But many of these villages came together to form centralized states.
The largest and longest lasting was Benin, located in what is now southern Nigeria.

The people of Benin speak a language called Edo. Legend tells us that they have always been surrounded by larger civilizations. Like the Yoruba to the west (descendants of the mysterious and artistic Nok people). And the Ibo to the east.

Ebo society was based on kinship-organized villages. Authority rested in males. Who were grouped according to age.

But this village system was changed into a centralized monarchy by Eware the Great, who ruled Benin from 1440 to 1473 AD.

Under his centralized authority -- and through his brilliant military strategy -- Benin expanded into an all-out empire in the Nigerian region.

Early on, the people of Benin had a rudimentary class system. With many different craft and art guilds.

Benin art centered around sculpture -- in terra cotta, ivory or brass. This sculpture is often historical, recounting important events like the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century.

The Portuguese were first of the Europeans who would change Africa forever.

At first, the forest kingdoms welcomed the Portuguese traders. Including Benin. The Oyo empire of the Yorubas. And the Manikongo kingdom in the Congo.

And participated with them in many ventures. Including the slave trade.

The initial contacts between the Africans and the Portuguese were very positive.

Each considered the other an exotic, but dignified and equal, partner.

Several African kingdoms sent ambassadors, intellectuals and students to Lisbon and Rome to study European ways. And to represent their own cultures.

But the slave trade changed everything. Which didn't get going in a big way until agriculture in the American South began to demand cheap labor.
Several African states got very rich from the slave trade. But they also had to fight many wars to obtain the captives they sold into slavery.

This often resulted in political instability.

Benin did not take part in the slave trade, but it was caught up in the slave wars between other black African kingdoms.

In spite of this, it was one of the longest-lasting civilizations in western Africa.

It was still a powerful state when the European powers began to colonize Africa in the nineteenth century.

And of all the peoples the British tried to subdue, the Benin put up the biggest fight. But the British finally prevailed -- invading and dismantling ancient Benin in 1897.

Although a smaller Benin (once called Dahomey) gained its independence in 1960 and still exists today.

**The Swahili Kingdoms**

East Africa changed around the close of the first millennium AD.

Bantus from the interior migrated and settled along the coast from Kenya to South Africa.

As well as merchants from India and the Muslim world. Who traded in ivory, sandalwood, ebony and gold.

The Arabs called this region *al-Zanj* -- which means "the blacks."

By 1200 AD, east African ports from Mombaza to Safala had become throughly Islamic.

The language that grew out of this Bantu-Arab mix was called *Swahili*. Which means "coast" in Arabic. As we told you, this language is spoken by over 50 million people today.

Although Arabs and Persians played a significant part in Swahili civilization, the cities were run by a black African nobility. Many of whom owned slaves. The populations also included a significant numbers of foreigners (primarily Muslims and Indians).

These city-states declined as trade moved to West Africa with the Portuguese and Spanish.

**Great Zimbabwe**

The last of the great African civilizations we want to discuss is literally called "great." *Great Zimbabwe*.

The Zimbabweans (Mwenemutapa) were a Bantu-speaking people in southeastern Africa.

They lived in a region south of the Zambezi River. In a country still called Zimbabwe. (Although during British occupation it was known as Southern Rhodesia.)

Their ancestors were part of the Bantu migration. Who brought iron smelting and agriculture with them.

Great Zimbabwe was rich in gold. So rich it was rumored to be the site of the fabled "King Solomon's Mines."

It became involved in the trade for Chinese, Persian and Indian goods. Which encouraged the people to centralize their government.

The word *zimbabwe* means "stone enclosure." And a great stone fort was built for Zimbabwe's kings.

You can visit it today. Near the city of Masvingo. Or see it on the PBS documentary we described earlier -- *Wonders of the African World*.

By 1500 AD, Great Zimbabwe dominated the Zambezi valley.
It was so far inland that it never felt the political or cultural influence of Islam.

So its native culture (aside from things adopted from the British) is considered to be very "African."

**The Culture of Africa**

Which brings up an important point.

With so many different civilizations, is there really such a thing as a common "African culture?"

Scholars don't agree.

But there do seem to be some common threads.

Today's African states are divided by borders imposed a century ago by European colonial powers. Who carved up the continent according to their own imperial conquests and agreements.

So cultural patterns tend to exist across borders.

Most cultures involve strong oral traditions, including poetry.

Most African societies were matrilineal. Which means that ancestry is traced through the female line. In Kush, for example, this led to a series of important female rulers. More so than in any other known civilization.

Many Africans share a belief in reincarnation, the value of children and the ultimate goodness of the earth. As well as reverence for their ancestors. Who are considered to still be part of the community.

The ethical principles of *Ma’at* (which we told you about in our Instruction on Egypt) are key to the traditional African approach to life.

*Ma’at* means right and righteousness, justice and harmony, balance, respect and human dignity.
Traditional African religions perpetuate three fundamental principles.

Harmony between humans.

Harmony between humans and the environment, and

Harmony between humans and the spirit world.