Lesson 1

MAIN IDEAS

1. **Culture** Strong family relationships and agriculture shaped life for most people in West Africa.
2. **Government** Powerful kings helped expand trading networks that included slavery.
3. **Culture** Oral traditions preserved the history of West African village societies.

TAKING NOTES

**Reading Skill: Summarizing**

When you summarize, you restate something in fewer words. In Lesson 1, summarize each of the main sections using a chart like the one below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
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<tr>
<td>Village life in West Africa</td>
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**Skillbuilder Handbook, page R3**

CALIFORNIA STANDARDS

7.4.1 Study the Niger River and the relationship of vegetation zones of forest, savannah, and desert to trade in gold, salt, food, and slaves; and the growth of the Ghana and Mali empires.

7.4.2 Analyze the importance of family, labor specialization, and regional commerce in the development of states and cities in West Africa.

7.4.5 Describe the importance of written and oral traditions in the transmission of African history and culture.
West African Culture and Daily Life

Build on What You Know  Think about your society’s structure: its government, economy, and the role of family and friends. You might be surprised to learn that many of the same structures were important to West African societies too.

Village Life in West Africa

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  What role did families play in West African society?

From 300 to 1500, powerful empires controlled much of West Africa. However, the rulers of these empires did not greatly affect the daily lives of their people. In fact, most West Africans dealt with their rulers only for court cases and taxes. Many people felt a greater sense of loyalty to their village—and to their family.

The Importance of Family  Family relationships were important in West Africa. A connection among people by blood, marriage, or adoption is called kinship. Kinship groups formed the government of many African societies. In kinship groups, decisions were often made by a council of the eldest members. Members of kinship groups felt strong loyalty to each other. Kinship groups with a common ancestor formed larger groups called clans. Clans usually followed the same rules. For example, in some clans, members were not allowed to marry one another.
Work  In West African villages, the way of life for most people centered on farming. Women prepared food, cared for the children, made pottery, worked in the fields, and brought water to the village. Men looked after large animals—such as cattle or camels—cleared land for farming, and built houses and fences. Children were often responsible for gathering firewood, helping their fathers tend the flocks, and helping their mothers clean their home.

Some people focused on specific types of work, a process known as labor specialization. Labor specialization led to a diverse West African economy. Most people practiced an economy based on farming. Others specialized in the herding of animals. Metalworking was a specialization that required great skill. Iron technology allowed Africans to create stronger agricultural tools and weapons. As a result of this technology, the population grew and became wealthier. Finally, some people traded goods within West Africa and with other regions, such as North Africa.

What does labor specialization mean?

Trade and Regional Commerce

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  How did trading develop in West Africa?

West African kingdoms began to grow through trade. As trading centers expanded, so did the need for control of trade.

Cities and States Develop  By A.D. 300, population growth and trade had led to the formation of West African cities such as Djenné (jeh•NAY). Then gold mining and a trade in slaves led to more contact with North Africa. As regional and international trade...
increased, the expanding cities became even more important as centers of trade. They also became centers of politics, religion, and education. Trade between West and North Africa continued to grow. West Africans received salt, cloth, and metal wares from North Africans. In return, West Africans traded gold, slaves, ivory, and cattle hides.

**Rise of Kings** As West African societies developed complex trade systems, some powerful individuals called kings gained control of this system. Many people were loyal to the king because he kept trade running smoothly. In addition, kings often played an important role in the religious life of the people. By performing the proper prayers and rituals, kings were expected to help bring rain, to make the land fertile, and to bring prosperity to their people.

**REVIEW** What was the relationship between kings and trade in West Africa?

**The Oral Tradition in West Africa**

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What is oral history?

For centuries, West Africa had no written language. As a result, early West Africans did not record a written history. Instead, they recorded their culture using oral history.

**Storytellers** West Africans passed on their history and cultural values through a rich collection of stories about people and spiritual forces of the natural world. The storytellers, or *griots* (gree•OHS), often used music in their stories.

The stories entertained and educated. A clan’s or kinship group’s history was passed on through the griots. West Africans believed their departed ancestors watched over them. They thought that their ancestors could help the living communicate with the creator of the universe. Griots were often part of religious rituals in which people appealed to ancestors for favor and protection. The griots were important in the transmission of African history.
**Stories and Community**  While the most famous griots sang for kings and other powerful people, they also entertained and instructed common villagers. Griots acted out various characters in a story, and the audience often participated.

The cultures you will read about in the rest of this chapter all had strong oral traditions. In fact, griots are still an important part of West African culture. Anthropologists have made an effort to write down the oral traditions of West Africa. But the griot’s performance and sense of community created is difficult to capture in written versions.

**REVIEW** Why were oral traditions important in West Africa?

**Lesson Summary**
- Kinship groups and farming shaped the lives of West Africans.
- Trade with North Africa brought wealth to West Africa where kings rose to power by controlling trade.
- Oral tradition preserved the history and culture of West Africans.

**Why It Matters Now . . .**  Many West Africans today still place a strong emphasis on their kinship group, and through storytelling children learn the stories of their ancestors.

**Terms & Names**
1. Explain the importance of kinship clan labor specialization griot

**Using Your Notes**
**Summarizing** Use your completed chart to complete the following exercise:
2. Summarize the role of trade in West Africa. (7.4.2)

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**Main Ideas**
3. What formed the basis for government in many African societies south of the Sahara? (7.4.2)
4. How did trade help cities and states develop? (7.4.1)
5. What role did oral tradition play in West African societies? (7.4.5)

**Critical Thinking**
6. **Contrasting** How might the West African oral tradition be different from written tradition? (7.4.5)
7. **Drawing Conclusions** How did West African farmers’ ability to grow more food encourage labor specialization? (7.4.2)

**Activity**
**Telling a Story**  Tell a story about your family or a friend, or about the history of your society to your class. (7.4.5)