

# Lesson 1 West African Culture and Daily Life

## MAIN IDEAS

**Culture** Strong family relationships and agriculture shaped life for most people in West Africa.

**Government** Powerful kings helped expand trading networks that included slavery.

**Culture** Oral traditions preserved the history of West African village societies.

---

## Village Life in West Africa

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

### The Importance of Family

- From 300–1500, powerful African rulers had little impact on daily life
  - court cases, taxes were primary involvement
- **Kinship**—connection among people through blood, marriage, adoption
  - kinship members were loyal; governed by council of elders
- **Clans**—large groups formed by kinship groups with common ancestors

### Work

- Farming was center of family, village life
  - women cared for children, cooked, made pottery, worked in fields
  - men built houses, cleared farm land for cattle, camels
  - children gathered firewood, helped mothers and fathers
- **Labor specialization**—specific types of work—led to diverse economy
  - metal work, tool-making, trade created wealth; population grew

### REVIEW QUESTION

What does labor specialization mean?

---

# Trade and Regional Commerce

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** How did trading develop in West Africa?

## Cities and States Develop

- By 300, West African cities such as Djenné grew
  - inland city along Niger River was regional, international hub
  - Djenné was also political, religious, education, and trade center
- West, North Africans traded salt, cloth, metal, gold, slaves, ivory

## Rise of Kings

- Kings took control of trade system
  - maintained order, gained loyalty
- Kings had religious role
  - expected to pray for rain, fertile land, and wealth

## REVIEW QUESTION

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

---

# The Oral Tradition in West Africa

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What is oral history?

## Storytellers

- No written history in ancient West Africa
- Culture, values, history passed on through rich, elaborate stories
- **Griots**—storytellers of history and spiritual kinships

## Stories and Community

- Griots performed for kings, commoners; oral traditions built community

## REVIEW QUESTION

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.