TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
Office of International Affairs
K-12 Global Education Outreach

Culture and Geography: Africa

The remains of ancient humanlike (hominid) ancestors from four million years ago were found in Africa, making it the birthplace of all humankind. The second largest continent, Africa measures 5,000 miles long from north to south and 4,600 miles long from east to west. Its geography and cultures are very diverse with deserts, rain forests, mountains, valleys, and many different ethnic groups represented.

Most of the languages spoken by people in Africa can be grouped into a few categories, such as Bantu or Sudanic, but one group may include several different dialects. European languages are also spoken throughout the continent because of the long colonial period, which lasted until the 1960's. During this time, European countries occupied regions of Africa to gain control of their rich natural resources. Colonial powers did not consider ethnic or tribal boundaries when carving out their territories. The forced blending of some tribes and ethnic groups continues to cause problems even today in many regions.

Although African societies vary in the ways they organize their families and social lives, some general patterns can be found. For example, marriage is usually considered a union of groups rather than individuals and that union is symbolized and made legal by the transfer of bridewealth from the groom's family to the bride's. ((Dowry- opposite of what American's traditionally practiced.)

In African societies, family history is traced either through the mother's (matrilineal) or father's (patrilineal) side of the family. Whether the society is matrilineal or patrilineal, men still have the most authority.

Some African societies are well known for art that is both useful and beautiful. Styles vary greatly from region to region, but the most common products are figurines that are used in sacrifice and worship, generally with heads oversized in relation to the body, and masks worn in ritual performances. In Liberia, masks are used to hide the faces of secret-society members and protect the identity of judges involved in settling tribal arguments or disputes.

Beading traditions can be found throughout Africa, but several regions are well known for the art form. The Maasai of Kenya are known for making complicated beaded necklaces and other items that are worn by both men and women in their society. Not only are the beads a colorful decoration, but they also capture the whole world of the Maasai culture. Necklaces are worn during marriage ceremonies, dances, rituals, and can also be found on the shield of the Maasai warriors. Colors and patterns indicate the Maasai's connection with nature, a tribe member's personal interests, and even the layout of the village. Similar beading traditions can also be found in Ghana where Krobo beads are created from crushed recycled bottles or glass. In ancient times, natural materials such as shells and stones were used.

Today, there are three basic types of Krobo beads: powder glass, see-through glass, and painted glass beads.

The Ashanti (Asante) of Ghana also produce colorful, geometrically designed Kente cloth. It is the best known of all African made fabric. Kente comes from the word kenten, which means "basket" or "woven cloth." The cloth can be identified by its dazzling, multicolored patterns of bright colors, geometric shapes, and bold designs. The design names for Kente cloths come from several sources, including proverbs, historical events, important chiefs, queen mothers, and plants. Most strip cloth in West Africa is woven by men. Kente consists of multiple woven strips of cloth. Each strip is woven in a continuous ban, four to eight inches wide, and sewn together into a single cloth. Historically, Kente was the cloth of kings, but over time its use became more widespread within the tribe and worn on multiple occasions. Kente is comparable to wearing an evening gown or tuxedo in our culture. When worn, Kente brings honor and importance to a ceremonial occasion.

Sources:

National Geographic, *Book of Peoples of the World- A Guide to Cultures*
www.culturalsurvival.org
https://africa.si.edu
CIA World Factbook

NAME: _____ **DATE:** _____

Directions: Use the information from the reading and the word bank below to complete the Quick-Write exercise.

Continent	Marriage	Ancient
Natural resources	Masks	Beads
Colonial period	Beading	Economy
Ancestors	Tradition	Ghana
Tribes	Maasai	Kente cloth
Matrilineal	Society	Culture
Patrilineal	Nature	Ceremonies