

Chapter 1

The Black Man's African Past

A Black skin means membership in a race of men which has never created a civilization of any kind. – John Burgess, Scholar

Before doing the reading, answer the following questions, true or false. (make a chart similar to the one below on your own paper.)

Statement	True/ False	Still T/F
1. Most of Africa is jungle.		
2. Africans usually were hunters.		
3. Most Africans lived in primitive tribes.		
4. There were few if any cities in Africa 400 years ago.		
5. The Africans did not use money 400 years ago.		
6. Most Africans believed in "witch gods" 400 years ago.		
7. There was no slavery in Africa.		
8. 400 years ago, Africans did not have a written language.		
9. White people brought civilization to Africa.		
10. Religion was very important to Africans.		

Now read the story of Gustavus Vassa and the excerpts from the History textbook. Then decide if the statement is still true – and if it isn't write a true statement based on the new information you just learned. Rewrite the original statement if it was false, even if you did not agree with it.

Gustavus Vassa

Gustavus Vassa was born in Benin in West Africa. He was the youngest son of a chief. At age 11, Gustavus was captured by slave traders and was taken hundreds of miles from his home. When he arrived on the coast, he was sold to white men who put him on a slave ship. He was taken to America and sold several times. Up to this point, Vassa's story is much like that of about 10,000,000 Africans, except that Vassa survived the living hell of the slave ship. After that, his story is very unusual. Gustavus was taught to read and write and later was able to earn enough money to buy his own freedom. With the help of friends in England, he was able to find someone to publish his story. Parts of his book are printed below:

Vassa's Africa

The kingdom of Benin is divided into many districts. I was born in one of the villages furthest from the capital. The distance from the capital and sea coast must have been great. I had never heard of white men, the sea, or Europe, before I was captured.

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My people had little to do with the King of Benin. As far as I could tell, all of the government was run by chiefs or elders of my village. What happens in one village and family is pretty typical for the whole nation. Let me tell you of my life in Africa.

My father was one of those elders or chiefs, that I just mentioned. In our language he was called embrenche. It meant a grand person. These embrenche, or chief men, decided disputes, and punished crimes. On such times they gathered together. The trials were usually short. They followed the law of retaliation. I remember a man who was brought before my father. He was accused of kidnapping a boy. Although he was the son of a chief, he was ordered to pay back with a man or woman slave.

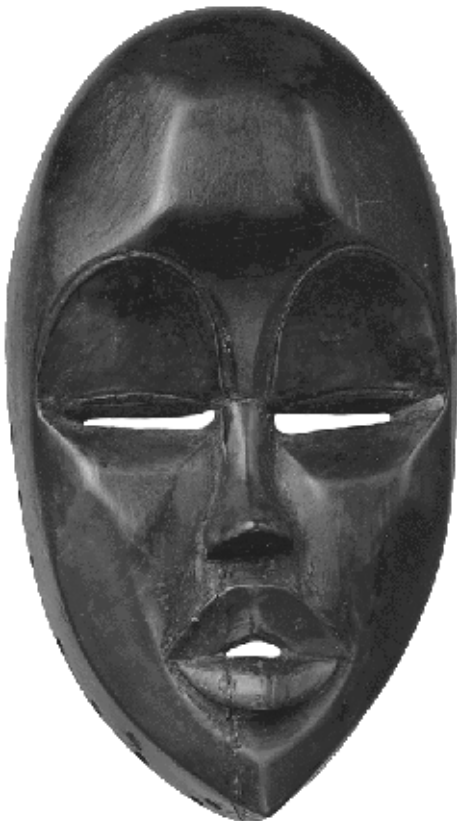
Economic Life in Africa

When the women are not farming with the men, they spin, weave cotton, dye it and make it into clothes. They also make many different kinds of pottery.

Our way of living was very plain. Our food were mainly cows, goats, and chickens or ducks. These meats are the main wealth of our country, and are used in trade. The flesh is usually stewed in a pan. We use spices such as pepper and salt. Our vegetables are mainly yams, beans, and Indian corn.

Our wants are few and easily supplied. We manufacture a few items, such as cloth, pottery and tools for war or farming. These we make for ourselves and do not sell. In such a state as this, money is of little use. However, we do have some small pieces of coin. They are made something like an anchor, but I do not remember any more about them. We also have markets, at which I have often gone with my mother. Here

we sometimes meet men called Cye Eboe (probably Ibo) which means red men living far away. They often bring us firearms, gunpowder, hats, beads, and dried fish. They exchange these articles for sweet – smelling woods, and our salt of wood ashes. They also carry slaves through our land. Before they are allowed to go on, the chiefs check carefully to see how they were obtained.



Our land is unusually rich and fruitful. Agriculture is our main work, and even women and children help farm. Thus we are all used to work from our earliest years. Every one contributes something for the common good. No one is idle, and we have no beggars.

Customs in Vassa's Africa

We are a nation of dancers, musicians and poets. Every great event, such as a victory in battle, is celebrated in public dances. Songs and music is made that fits the occasion. The people are separated into four parts. and each has a special dance. Each pictures some interesting scene of real life, such as a great victory, a kind of work or a sad story. People are always making new dances for new events. This gives our dance a spirit which I have never seen elsewhere.

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We have simple manners and few luxuries. The dress of men and women are the same. There is generally a long piece of cloth, wrapped around the body. It is usually dyed blue, which is our favorite color. The dye is taken from a berry and is much brighter and richer than any other I have seen.

The head of a family usually eats alone. His wives and slaves also have separate tables. Before we taste food, we always wash our hands. After washing, an offering to the spirits is made by pouring a small part of the drink on the floor. Then food is put in a certain place for the spirits of our departed relatives. We never forget the dead. They watch over us and we watch over them.

We believe that there is one Creator of all things and that he lives in the sun. We believe that he controls the fates. We have never heard of a life ever—after in heaven, but there are some in my village who believe that the soul goes into another body. Those spirits that don't enter another body, such as close relatives, help guard us from the bad spirits of our enemies.¹

A Textbook History of Africa

Africa, the world's second largest continent, then included (and still does) many different social groups. Each of these groups had developed its own way of life, its own culture. There were striking differences among the groups in height, built, and color of skin. There were equally striking differences in social organization.

Long before the New World was discovered, a number of African societies - among them the West African kingdoms of Ghana, Melle, Benin and Songhay - had reached a high degree of civilization. For example, the ancient empire of Ghana, from which the modern nation of Ghana has taken its name,



Mosque at Djenne, sister city to Timbuktu

flourished for centuries. It reached the peak of its power five-hundred years before Columbus discovered America. Under the Negro King, Ask the Great, the two cities of Nenne and Timbuktu became trading and intellectual centers whose fame spread from Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East. Moslem businessmen, statesmen, and scholars traveled to the cities of this African empire regularly. At the same time, scholars from the university located at Timbuktu won fame for their works. They visited and served as

professors at the universities of Fez, Tunis and Cairo.

Another example of a high level of development was the Ashanti kingdom of the Gold Coast. When the first British mission visited the Ashanti capital in 1817, the British were surprised to see the

² level of culture the Negroes had established. The British saw a well-organized society with trained soldiers and an elaborate social life, they saw the high craftsmanship of the Negroes revealed in beautifully woven silk robes and skillfully designed jewelry.

¹ Oludah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative in the Life of Oludah Equiano, or Gustavas Vasa, the African*, Dublin, 1791. pp. 3-21.

² <http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Classroom/9912/ancientmali.html> World Heritage City,

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The first European found similar conditions in the kingdom of Dahomey There roads were broad, clean, well laid out; buildings clean and neat. Law and order prevailed. Trade prospered. Taxes and customs duties were collected. A mail service was used.³

Malcolm X on African History

The U.S. History text books in Malcolm X's school days had no chapters which emphasized the many fine qualities of African culture, cities and civilization. In the following passage this famous African-American leader claims that there was a conscious decision made by whites to deny blacks of their African heritage:

They should have put it in the headlines, so they could wake black people up , And our people know that the white man knows that he didn't get us out of the jungle, he don't get us out of some place that was savage - he got us out of a place that was highly civilized in culture and in art, and then brought us down to the level that you see us today. But they are afraid to let us know what level we are on. They'll tell the Africans because they know the Africans know it, but they don't want you and me to know it.. Because the first thing you and I would start asking them is, "Well, what did you do to us?" And if you find out, then you'll want to do it to him.⁴

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. After completing the reading (having answered the T/F questions before you did the reading) state which of the original statements were false? On a separate piece of paper make and complete a table similar to the following:

Original statement	True/ False	Facts that Show Original Statement False if it Was False
1.		
2.		
3. etc.		

2. What in general was the picture of life in Africa given in the reading as opposed to the picture reflected in the original statements. Give as many examples as you can.

3. How does Malcolm X account for the difference? Comment on his explanation, and any other explanation you may have.

³ Lewis Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation*, Harcourt Brace, 1968, p 440.

⁴Betty Shabazz and Merit Publishers, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*, Pathfinder Press, Inc., New World, 1970, p 26.