West African Society and Culture

West Africa’s great ethnic and cultural diversity makes it hazardous to generalize about the social and cultural background of the first African Americans. But historians have pieced together a broad understanding of the way the people of West Africa lived at the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade.

Families and Village Life

By the early sixteenth century, most West Africans were farmers. Villages tended to be larger on the savannah than in the forest. In both regions, people used forced earth or mud to construct small houses, which were round or rectangular in shape, depending on local tradition. The houses usually had thatched roofs, or, sometimes in the forest, they had palm roofs. In both savannah and forest, mud or mud-brick walls up to 10 feet high surrounded villages.

Villagers in both the savannah and forest regions produced cotton for clothing, but their food crops were quite distinct. West Africans in the savannah cultivated millet, rice, and sorghum as their dietary staples; kept goats and cattle for milk and cheese; and supplemented their diets with peas, okra, watermelons, and a variety of nuts. Yams, rather than grains, were the dietary staple in the forest region.

Gender Roles

In West Africa, people generally worked land communally, dividing tasks by gender. Among the Akan of the Guinea coast, for example, men were responsible for clearing the land of trees and underbrush while women tended the fields (planting, weeding, harvesting, and carrying in the harvested produce). Women also took care of children, prepared meals, and manufactured household pottery.

Throughout the region secret societies instilled in men and women ethical standards of personal behavior. The most important secret societies were the women’s Sande and the men’s Poro. They initiated boys and girls into adulthood. They also established standards for personal conduct, especially in regard to issues of gender, by emphasizing female virtue and male honor. Other secret societies influenced politics, trade, medical practice, recreation, and social gatherings.

Social Class

Although many West Africans lived in stateless societies, most lived in hierarchically organized states headed by monarchs who claimed divine or semidivine status. These monarchs were far from absolute in the power they
wielded, but they commanded armies, taxed commerce, and accumulated considerable wealth. Beneath the royalty were classes of landed nobles, warriors, peasants, and bureaucrats. Lower classes included blacksmiths, butchers, weavers, woodcarvers, tanners, and the oral historians called griots.

Religion
There were two religious traditions in fifteenth-century West Africa: Islamic and indigenous. Islam, which was introduced into West Africa by Arab traders and took root first in the Sudanese empires, was most prevalent in the more cosmopolitan savannah.

West Africa’s indigenous religions remained strongest in the forest region. They were polytheistic and animistic, recognizing a great number of divinities and spirits. Beneath an all-powerful creator god were lesser gods who represented the forces of nature. Other gods were associated with particular mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks. Indigenous West African religion saw the force of God in all things.

Art and Music
West African art was intimately related to religious practice. West Africans, seeking to preserve the images of their ancestors, excelled in woodcarving and sculpture in terra-cotta, bronze, and brass. Throughout the region, artists produced wooden masks representing in highly stylized manners ancestral spirits as well as various divinities. Wooden and terra-cotta figurines, sometimes referred to as “fetishes,” were also extremely common. West Africans used them in funerals, in rituals related to ancestral spirits, in medical practice, and in coming-of-age ceremonies.

Literature: Oral Histories, Poetry, and Tales
West African literature was part of an oral tradition that passed from generation to generation. At its most formal, this was a literature developed by specially trained poets and musicians who served kings and nobles. But West African literature was also a folk art that expressed the views of the common people.

At a king’s court there could be several poet-musicians who had high status and specialized in poems glorifying rulers and their ancestors by linking fact and fiction. Recitations of these poems were often accompanied by drums and horns. Court poets also used their trained memories to recall historical events and precise genealogies. The self-employed poets, called griots, who traveled from place to place were socially inferior to court poets, but they functioned in a similar manner. Both court poets and griots were men.

Reading Check
What aspects of West African society can we see in the evidence at the crime scene?