Chapter One

Africa: Ripe for the Plunder

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“Life in Africa before our enslavement was hardly idyllic, just as life in Africa is not idyllic today (for reasons involving corruption, dictatorial leaders, geopolitics, globalization, and so on). Our task is not to create some illusory ideal past, but to pass on genuine knowledge and wisdom about our actual shared history. Modern human beings have been on this planet for about 200,000 years; civilization as we know it is roughly 6,000 years old. The first modern human beings were Black; so were the first civilizations. We need to teach our children this as well.”

—Resmaa Menakem, My Grandmother’s Hands, p. 256.

The story of Africa and its people is often told starting with slavery and jumping straight to the intergenerational trauma that followed. The beauty of Africa and all that originated from it often seems to have been forgotten. So, in this first chapter of the Healing History Web Page, we start by celebrating a continent full of history, culture, families, and human beginnings.

This chapter begins with a focus on Africa and all its riches before colonization, westernization, and the abduction of more than 12.5 million people. Understanding history is an important key to understanding the present and respecting the fact that the history of Black people is in no way the same for each individual of African descent.

As we embark on this exploration of ancient African history, it is important to note the importance of oral storytelling in Africa. The culture of oral storytelling is an important way to preserve history through generations. Traditional ancient histories on the African continent have been written, but oral storytelling is one of the oldest ways to reflect the African concept of Ubuntu (Tuwe, 2016). This concept reflects the moral obligation of the people of Africa to celebrate and honor the belief that “I
“Am what I am because of you,” and to uphold a people-centered view of humanity (Tuwe, 2016). African storytelling has not only preserved history, but it has also brought people together to listen and participate in stories related to past deeds, beliefs, wisdoms, counsel, morals, taboo, and myths (wa Thiong’o, 1992; Utley, 2008).

So, as we look at the history of Africa, we might also listen for the voices of the storytellers. If we are thinking about healing history, we must learn all we can about what those 12.5 million people lost when they were chained and carried from its shores.

**The Cradle of Humankind**

Africa is known to be the birthplace of human life. With 54 countries, more than 2,000 languages, dynamic spirituality, and rich cultures, Africa is the most genetically diverse continent on the planet (Tishkoff et al., 2009).

Some regions have been home to major fossil sites that hold evidence of human beings dating back three million years or more. In South Africa, for example, the “Cradle of Humankind”—aptly named because of the number of fossils and artifacts that have been discovered there—is one of the world’s most important archaeological excavation sites (Caruana and Stratford, 2019).

Africa is a vast continent with much variety from region to region. We will touch on the history of three distinct regions:

- **Northeast Africa**
  - Modern-day Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda
- **Southern Africa**
  - Modern-day Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe
- **Western Africa**

Over time, Africa has gone through many spiritual, cultural, linguistic, and societal changes. Although discussion of these changes rarely exists outside the sphere of the African community, it goes without
saying that these trends also influenced other regions around the globe. (For more about the “Global African History Timeline,” click here.)

Northeast Africa

As the African Migration took place, the evolution from our early ancestors to Africa’s ancient civilizations gave rise to great diversity within humankind. Our African ancestors settled in different parts of the continent and allowed their creativity to become an essential and abundant ingredient of survival and development.

The two most significant empires in ancient Northeast Africa were the Egyptian and Nubian empires. In ancient Egypt, the invention of basin irrigation allowed even arid land to sustain life for large populations (Mays, 2013). Ancient Nubia experienced times of peace and times of war with the ancient Egyptian civilization. Nubia was also a key region for trade between Egypt and tropical Africa (Encyclopedia Britannica [EB], n.d.).

The Struggle for Power

Around 2000 BCE, the Nubian empire gained power over Egypt (EB, n.d.). At the height of its success (between 2050 BCE and 1500 CE), the Nubian Empire ruled as pharaohs of the 25th dynasty for about 93 years (Kemezis, 2010; EB, n.d.; Jarus, 2017). The empire’s rule over Egypt ended after a battle won by the Assyrians, a Middle Eastern civilization living on land now occupied by most of Iraq and parts of Iran, Kuwait, Syria, and Turkey (Kemezis, 2010; EB, n.d.; Jarus, 2017).

We in the Western world have been exposed to far more information about ancient Egypt than about ancient Nubia, because Egypt is often included in the sphere of Biblical studies rather than thought of as part of Africa. This may have been influenced by the work of a branch of archeologists (called “Egyptologists”) who used race to reframe Egypt’s history, separating the “white” Egyptians from the “Black” Nubians (Ancient Nubia Now, 2019). (For more about “How Egyptologists Removed Ancient Egypt from Africa,” click here.)

The Religions of Northeast Africa

The African Migration across the continent provided space for diverse cultures to develop through music, the arts, language, and religion. Over time, treaties and invasions from several countries on other continents also influenced the cultures in both Egypt and Nubia.

For a period of time, both the ancient Egyptians and the ancient Nubians practiced polytheism (Dorman and Barnes, 2020). They viewed their king as the center of human society, the intermediary...
between the gods and humanity, who after death would be deified and live on as a god (Dorman and Barnes, 2020). People in these civilizations also believed that the gods, humanity, kings, and the dead existed together in the cosmos (Dorman and Barnes, 2020). This sense of the transcendent may have contributed to the importance of holistic community that characterizes many African cultural belief systems.

The people believed in celebrating the gods on earth through festivals that took place in and around places of worship. This provided space for people to interact directly with the gods. Their provision of offerings to the gods was an important way of giving thanks, another tradition that many African and African-influenced countries still practice today in different variations of carnival (Dorman and Banes, 2020). Ancient Egyptians and Nubians prepared their dead for safe passage to the afterlife through mumification, bringing humanity full circle from their time on earth to their life in the larger cosmos (Dorman and Banes, 2020). (For a video on “Ancient Egyptian Religion,” click here.)

Nubia adopted Christianity through Roman influence and practiced it widely over time. Then, after Arab rule, Islam became the region’s primary religion. Northeast Africa experienced many cycles of cultural exchange, influenced by its many interactions with other ancient civilizations.

**Southern Africa**

Southern Africa’s first state may have been the kingdom of Mapungubwe, which flourished in present-day Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa between the tenth and thirteenth centuries CE (Cartwright, 2019c). It was the Iron Age, when metals became the preferred material for tool making, so Mapungubwe grew prosperous because of its rich resources of copper, ivory, gold, and cattle (World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

The heart of the kingdom was centered on a large plateau (Mapungubwe plateau) enclosed by stone walls. Inside lived the king, his court, and the royal wives. At the highest elevation, they performed rainmaking rituals (Cartwright, 2019c).

The king owned more cattle and material than the rest of the people, and his country conducted significant production and trade in copper, ivory, gold, and pottery. Their wares were traded as far away as India, China, and Arabia (Cartwright, 2019c). The kingdom of Mapungubwe was the first southern region of Africa to place intrinsic value on gold, beyond its value as currency (Cartwright, 2019c).
As resources began to dwindle from drought and overuse, other kingdoms, such as the kingdom of Great Zimbabwe, began to flourish in the regions to the north of Mapungubwe (Cartwright, 2019c). For a video on “Mapungubwe—Lost Kingdoms of Africa,” click here.

**Western Africa**

We arrive last in Western Africa, the region that would eventually become the central target of the European slave trade. Reaching much farther back into history, we will look briefly at four civilizations: the Ghana Empire, the Kingdom of Sosso, the Mali Empire, and the Kingdom of Benin.

*The Ghana Empire*

The Ghana Empire, spanning the 6th through the 13th centuries CE, was located in the area currently known as Mauritania and Mali (Cartwright, 2019b). The kings of this empire made their fortune from large supplies of gold nuggets that only they were allowed to possess, allowing them to corner the gold market in Western Africa.

The spread of their gold extended to regions in North Africa and Europe, making the Ghana empire a high-traffic location on the trade routes in and out of Africa (Cartwright, 2019).

The land was fertile from the flooding of the Niger River in the dry grasslands, producing many crops that could be consumed by the people of the empire and traded elsewhere. A well trained army protected the king and the villages and conquered new territories beyond the region (Cartwright, 2019b). The king received sacrifices from the people as he played a dual role, head of both justice and religion.

As trade among regions increased, religious influences increased as well. Muslim merchants also carried both their goods and their religion, Islam, on their trade routes. The Ghana Empire divided in two, one that was influenced by Islam and one that maintained its traditional religious allegiance to the king (Cartwright, 2019b).

Years later, Ghana would become infamous as the busiest launching point for the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The West African coast is haunted with old slave castles, the most famous being Ghana’s Elmina and Cape Coast Castles. There countless tortured souls were held in chains in the darkness, then forced to walk through the “Door of No Return” toward the waiting slave ships and away from all hope of home and freedom.
The Kingdom of Sosso and the Mali Empire

The Ghana Empire began to decline after civil wars, rebellion, and poor harvests adversely affected its economy. The Kingdom of Sosso soon took over and started to conquer nearby regions. It was then that the prince of the Makinke tribe waged war against the Kingdom of Sosso and won, founding the Mali Empire (Cartwright, 2019a).

During the time of the Mali Empire, an intricate and systematic web of trade centers began to develop, Timbuktu being one of the most lucrative of these centers (Cartwright, 2019a). Textiles, gold, ivory, horses, spices, and slaves were all traded there.

The Mali Empire became even more powerful during the reign of Mansa Musa I during the 13th century. Mansa Musa not only increased the size of the territory, reaching from what is now Gambia to include lower Senegal, but he also diversified the region with the inclusion of different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. After traveling to Mecca, Mansa Musa brought back Muslim architects, scholars, and books, further promoting the spread of Islam in Western Africa (Cartwright, 2019a).

Mali culture was also rich in storytellers, known as griots, and in music that was passed from generation to generation. By the 15th century, the Mali Empire began to decline due to civil war and its inability to compete with more successful kingdoms (Cartwright, 2019a). (For a video called “Mali Emperors Family Tree: Mansa Musa—the Richest Man in World History,” click here.)

The Kingdom of Benin

The Kingdom of Benin, located in what is now Nigeria, was most successful between the 13th and 19th centuries CE. The Kingdom had strong trade ties with Portugal, whose government was seeking gold and slaves (Cartwright, 2019d). The region was a mixture of rainforests, mangrove swamps, and dry forests, yielding an abundance of resources for trade, including stone, fish, yams, cattle, copper, brass, bronze, and gold (Plankensteiner, 2007; Cartwright, 2019d). Artists and artisans crafted beautiful bronze sculptures, including many images of the human head. (For a video on “Western Reactions to Benin Bronzes,” click here.)

As European interest in African resources began to rise, the Western part of Africa became the first stop on the trade route, moving up from its original position as last stop. After 1516 CE, the king of Benin (also called the Oba), took control of the trade within his kingdom by prohibiting the sale of male slaves (Plankensteiner, 2007; Cartwright, 2019d).
The king then attempted to negotiate with the Portuguese, but his efforts were unsuccessful. He found that Portuguese interests were focused on spreading Christianity to Africa (Plankensteiner, 2007; Cartwright, 2019d). He was able to maintain traditional beliefs in Western Africa for some time, until European missionaries came back in the 19th century to convert the people from their traditional beliefs. European interest in the resources of Western Africa increased even more, leading to the ultimate decline and British conquest of the Benin kingdom in 1897 (Cartwright, 2019d).

**What Was Lost**

The people of Africa once experienced riches—in trade, in culture, in love, and in human potential. They helped build and expand empires across the continent. The mixing of their many cultures facilitated the development of art through storytelling, pottery, architecture, and sculpture. Their natural resources put the continent on the map, making it a “curiosity stop” on the trade routes that stretched to other continents. Languages developed and religions spread, but as European interest grew, the downfall of the African people began.

Learning and telling the story of Africa before the slave trade carries an extra level of complexity. Much of the most powerful information about early African civilizations may have been handed down through oral traditions that never reached the 21st century West.

Some empires were hidden in history books, and others were spoken of only if they had a strong connection to Europe. This birthplace of humankind and land of resources was overshadowed by power and the European will to conquer. As the slave trade expanded Westward, many Africans stepped through the Door of no Return, leaving behind family, tradition, and a natural way of life.

There is also no reliable way to assess the impact that colonization and the loss of more than 12.5 million young, able-bodied people has had on Africa, its cultures, and its people. In the words of one African historian, “There was not a single spot of our continent that was out of reach of enslavers. It is more than the physical destruction of people. There was no hope for anyone for centuries” (BBC News Africa).  *(To watch the video, called “Slavery and Suffering—History of Africa (16),” click here.)*

As Resmaa Menakem wrote, Africa neither was nor is an Idyllic place, but it was the cradle of civilization and it still is a wellspring of ingenuity, creativity, and initiative. As you read about the forces that captured, denigrated, and abused the enslaved sons and daughters of Africa, please remember the resilience that is rooted deeply within their history. And history is not yet over.
References


