

West Africa**Section 1****MAIN IDEAS**

1. West Africa's key physical features include plains and the Niger River.
2. West Africa has distinct climate and vegetation zones that go from arid in the north to tropical in the south.
3. West Africa has good agricultural and mineral resources that may one day help the economies in the region.

Key Terms and Places

Niger River most important river in West Africa

zonal organized by zone

Sahel a strip of land that divides the desert from wetter areas

desertification the spread of desert-like conditions

savanna an area of tall grasses and scattered trees and shrubs

Section Summary**PHYSICAL FEATURES**

The main physical features in West Africa are plains and rivers. Most of the region is covered by plains. Plains along the coast have most of the region's cities. People on inland plains usually farm or raise animals. There are a few highlands in the southwest and northeast of the region.

The **Niger River** is the most important river in the region. It brings water to the people of the region for farming and fishing. It also provides a transportation route. It has an inland delta hundreds of miles from the coast where it divides into a network of channels, swamps, and lakes.

Underline the sentences that describe the importance of the Niger River to the region.

CLIMATE AND VEGETATION

West Africa has four climate regions, which are **zonal**, or organized by zone. They stretch from east to west. The zone farthest north is part of the largest desert in the world, the Sahara.

Just to the south of the Sahara is a region called the **Sahel**. It is a strip of land that divides the

Circle the name of the largest desert in the world.

Section 1, *continued*

desert from wetter areas. It has a steppe climate where rainfall varies greatly from year to year. Although it is very dry, enough plants grow there to support some grazing animals.

Because animals have overgrazed the Sahel and people have cut trees for firewood, the wind blows soil away. There has also been drought in the area. This has caused **desertification**, or the spread of desert-like conditions.

To the south of the Sahel is **savanna**, an area of tall grasses and scattered trees and shrubs. When rain falls regularly, it is a good area for farming.

The coasts of the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea have a humid tropical climate. Much rain there supports tropical forests. Many trees have been cut to make room for the growing population.

What are two causes of desertification?

Why have many trees been cut from tropical rain forests?

RESOURCES

Because of the good farmland and climate in some areas, agricultural products are an important resource. These include coffee, coconuts, peanuts, and cacao, which is used to make chocolate. West Africa also has minerals such as diamonds, gold, iron ore, and bauxite, which is the source of aluminum. Oil is the region's most valuable resource. Nigeria is a major exporter of oil, which is found near its coast.

List four mineral resources found in West Africa.

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Identifying Cause and Effect Why do you think fewer people live in the northern portion of the region than in the southern portion? Write a paragraph to explain your reasoning.

West Africa

Section 2



MAIN IDEAS

1. In West Africa's history, trade made great kingdoms rich, but this greatness declined as Europeans began to control trade routes.
2. The culture of West Africa includes many different ethnic groups, languages, religions, and housing styles.

Key Terms and Places

Timbuktu the cultural center of the Songhai Empire in the 1500s

animism the belief that bodies of water, animals, trees, and other natural objects have spirits

extended family a group of family members that includes the father, mother, children, and close relatives in one household

Section Summary

HISTORY

One of the earliest kingdoms in West Africa was Ghana, which became rich and powerful by about 800. It controlled trade in gold and salt across the Sahara. In about 1300, the empire of Mali took over. It controlled the trade routes and supported artists and scholars. The empire of Songhai took control in the 1500s. Its cultural center was **Timbuktu**. It had a university, mosques, and many schools. But invasions weakened it, and trade decreased.

Europeans began the Atlantic slave trade in the 1500s. Their colonies in the Americas needed labor to work on large plantations. European traders sold enslaved Africans to colonists. Families were split up, and many people died. By the time the slave trade ended in the 1800s, millions of Africans had been taken from their homes.

European countries claimed colonies in West Africa in the late 1800s and kept control until after World War II. They built schools, roads, and railroads, but many Africans gave up farming and worked for low wages. All the countries in West Africa became independent by 1974.

Underline the sentence describing Timbuktu.

When did the Atlantic slave trade begin? When did it end?

Section 2, *continued*

CULTURE

The societies in West Africa have been influenced by African cultures, European culture, and Islam. There are hundreds of ethnic groups in the region. European colonizers drew borders for countries that put different ethnic groups in one country or separated one group into different countries. Many West Africans are more loyal to their own ethnic groups than to their country. The groups speak hundreds of languages. The use of colonial languages or West African languages that many people share helps with communication.

West African religions include Islam in the north and Christianity in the south. Both were introduced by traders coming to the area. Traditional religions are forms of **animism**. Animism is the belief that bodies of water, animals, trees, and other natural objects have spirits.

Some people in the region wear Western-style clothing. Others wear traditional cotton clothing which is loose and flowing. Rural homes are small and often circular. They are made from mud or straw because there are few trees for wood. Extended families often live close together in a village. An **extended family** includes parents, children, and other relatives. West Africa's cities have modern buildings. Extended families may live together in houses or high-rise apartments.

Circle three influences on West African societies.

What are three major religions practiced in West Africa?

Why are many rural homes made from mud or straw?

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Comparing and Contrasting Think about the diversity in West African societies and the diversity in U.S. society, including religions, languages, and ethnic groups. Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast each society. Then write a paragraph that summarizes the information in your chart.

West Africa

Section 3



MAIN IDEAS

1. Nigeria has many different ethnic groups, an oil-based economy, and one of the world's largest cities.
2. Most coastal countries of West Africa have struggling economies and weak or unstable governments.
3. Lack of resources in the Sahel countries is a main challenge to economic development.

Key Terms and Places

secede break away from the main country

Lagos the former capital of Nigeria and the most populous city in West Africa

famine an extreme shortage of food

Section Summary

NIGERIA

Nigeria is the second largest country in West Africa. It has the largest population in Africa and the region's strongest economy. The Igbo ethnic group unsuccessfully tried to **secede**, or break away from the main country, in the 1960s. Leaders moved the capital to Abuja where there are few people, partly to avoid ethnic conflicts. The government is now a democracy after the military ruled for many years.

Nigeria's most important resource is oil. It accounts for 95 percent of the country's export earnings. The main industrial center is **Lagos**, which is the most populous city in West Africa and the former capital of Nigeria. Although Nigeria has many resources, many people are poor. It has a very high birthrate and cannot produce enough food. Corrupt government has also contributed to the country's poverty.

Underline the name of the capital of Nigeria.

What are two causes of poverty in Nigeria?

OTHER COASTAL COUNTRIES

Small countries along the coast struggle to develop their economies and stabilize their governments. Senegal and Gambia produce peanuts and offer

tourism sites. Guinea has some bauxite reserves. Guinea-Bissau has undeveloped mineral resources. Cape Verde is an island country with a democratic government.

Liberia was founded in the 1820s by Americans for freed slaves. A long civil war there ended in 2003. Civil war in Sierra Leone helped destroy the economies in the area and killed thousands. Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire have rich natural resources including gold, timber, and agricultural products, but these countries have also experienced civil war. Unstable governments and poor farming economies have hurt Togo and Benin.

Circle the type of government Cape Verde has.

What two coastal countries have the greatest natural resources?

SAHEL COUNTRIES

Drought and the expanding desert challenge the Sahel countries to feed their own people. Former nomads in Mauritania are now crowded into cities. Ethnic tensions continue to cause problems there. Niger has a very small amount of farmland where people grow staple, or main, crops. Drought and locusts created **famine**, or an extreme shortage of food, there in the early 2000s. Chad depends on farming and fishing in Lake Chad, although much of its water has evaporated in recent years. It began to export oil in 2004.

Much of Mali is desert with some farming in the south. It is one of the poorest countries in the world, but its economy is improving. Burkina Faso is also very poor and has few resources. Conflicts in the region have hurt its economy.

Underline the causes of famine in Niger.

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Comparing and Contrasting Write an essay that compares and contrasts the government, resources, and economy of Nigeria with the other countries in the region.

Kwame Nkrumah

1909–1972



HOW HE AFFECTED THE REGION Kwame Nkrumah was a politician from Ghana and one of the most influential founders of **Pan-Africanism**. He declared Ghana's independence in 1957 and served as its leader for nine years.



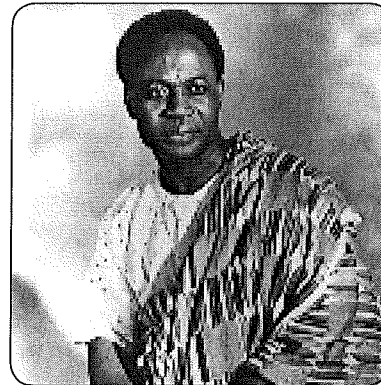
As you read the biography below, think about how Kwame Nkrumah used his education and life experiences to free his people.

“We prefer self-government in danger to servitude in **tranquility**. Forward ever, backward never!” Kwame Nkrumah’s words were taken up all over Ghana. The people shouted, “Self-government now!”

Peace did not follow Kwame Nkrumah, but he did not want it that way. Born in Ghana in 1909, he attended local schools and later taught at a Roman Catholic Seminary. In 1935 he left Africa for the United States, where he graduated from college in Pennsylvania with advanced degrees in education and philosophy.

Throughout much of his life, Nkrumah worked as a teacher and writer. He won many important awards. But in 1945 on a trip to London, he met a man who inspired him to organize a political freedom effort for Africa. Nkrumah became leader of “The Circle,” a secret organization dedicated to the unity and independence of West Africa.

He returned to Ghana in 1947 and formed his own political party called the Convention People’s Party in 1949. Their motto was “self-government now.” To persuade British leaders to grant Ghana its independence, Nkrumah urged people to take part



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VOCABULARY

Pan-Africanism the idea that Africans should be free to self-govern without outside oppression

tranquility peace

boycotts refusals to do business with someone

coup d’etat a sudden overthrow of a government by a small group

exile send away from your native country

in peaceful protests, such as **boycotts** and strikes. Nkrumah was arrested by English police in 1950. One year later he won an election while in prison. He was later released and helped set up a new government in Ghana.

In 1957 Nkrumah declared Ghana's independence from England. Three years later, he declared the country a Republic. He established Ghana as a one-party state and named himself its president for life. Nkrumah was overthrown by a military **coup d'état** while out of the country, however.

Nkrumah was forced to live the rest of his life in **exile**. He lived in Guinea, then Romania, until his death in 1972. He holds a place in Ghana's history as a courageous leader who fought for and won his country's independence.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Recall** How did the motto "self-government now" fit Nkrumah's vision for Ghana's people?

- 2. Draw a Conclusion** Why do you think Nkrumah was overthrown as president for life and forced to live in exile?

ACTIVITY

Create a collage using newspaper clippings, pictures, and other paper items that represent the ideas Kwame Nkrumah believed in. For example, you could include a newspaper headline containing the word *independence* or a picture of people taking part in a boycott or strike.