Africa: Mapping Lab

**Introduction**

Africa is the second largest continent. The Atlantic Ocean lies to the west. The Indian Ocean lies to the east. The Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea lie to the north. A small piece of land in the northeast corner connects Africa to Asia. There are 48 countries on the continent of Africa. Six island nations are also part of the region. The largest of these islands is Madagascar.

Africa is made up of four sub-regions. The sub-regions of North Africa, East Africa, and West Africa occupy the northern half of the continent. The southern half is one large sub-region called Central and Southern Africa.
**Physical Features**

Africa is often called the “plateau continent.” The land is shaped like an upside-down pie plate. Much of the center of Africa is a high, dry **plateau**. At the edges of the continent, this plateau sometimes slopes to a coastal plain. In other places, it drops sharply into the sea.

There are huge, low-lying areas called **basins** in several places on this plateau. Four mighty rivers flow from these basins to the sea. Sometimes the land falls steeply as the rivers flow downstream. As a result, ships are not able to sail very far up these rivers into Africa’s interior.

**North Africa**

The Sahara is the main **physical feature** in North Africa. It is the world’s largest **desert**. The Sahara has sand dunes, bare rock, gravel plains, and mountains. The Nile, Africa’s longest river, runs through this desert and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. The Atlas Mountains stretch across the northwestern part of this region.

**West Africa**

South of the Sahara lies the Sahel region. The plains of the Sahel are mostly dry grassland. The Niger River runs through the western Sahel. This is the third longest river in Africa. Also in the Sahel is a large lake called Lake Chad. This lake shrinks and grows depending on the season. In general, it has been getting smaller for many years.

**East Africa**

Three large lakes lie in or near the Great Rift Valley. Lake Tanganyika is the longest **freshwater** lake in the world. Lake Victoria is the world’s second largest freshwater lake, and Lake Malawi is the ninth largest.

To the east of Lake Victoria, Mount Kilimanjaro rises from the plains. At 19,340 feet, this peak is the highest point in Africa.

The Ethiopian Highlands lie to the north of the lake. This rugged area covers two-thirds of the country of Ethiopia.

**Central and Southern Africa**

The Congo basin is a major physical feature of Central and Southern Africa. This large, low-lying area sits at the center of the continent. The Congo River loops through this basin and empties into the Atlantic Ocean. Farther south lies the Zambezi River. This river has many waterfalls. The largest of these is the beautiful Victoria Falls. Two deserts, the Namib and Kalahari, make up much of the southern part of this region.
Climate

The equator divides Africa nearly in half. As a result, the climate in most of Africa is warm all year. However, some regions are very wet and others very dry.

As you read in Lesson 2, places near the equator are warm because the sun is almost directly overhead all year. As the air over the equator warms, it expands and rises. Once it rises, the air begins to cool. If the air is wet, it drops moisture in the form of rain as it cools. In Africa, this rain falls in a wide band north and south of the equator.

After rising, this air begins to move toward the North or South poles. But by this time, it is quite dry. As a result, little or no rain falls on parts of Africa farther away from the equator. This lack of rainfall has created vast deserts in northern and southern Africa.

North Africa

Most of North Africa is very dry. Some places in the Sahara can go for six or seven years without rain. Areas of North Africa near the Mediterranean Sea enjoy a Mediterranean climate. Here, it is warm all year with dry summers and short, rainy winters.

West Africa

The climate of West Africa varies widely from north to south. The northern part is arid and semiarid. Moving south, the climate changes to tropical wet and dry. This area is hot all year with rainy and dry seasons. Closer to the equator, coastal areas have a tropical wet climate. This means it is hot and rainy all year. Some coastal areas get about 60 inches of rain a year.

East Africa

The parts of East Africa that lie in or close to the Sahara have an arid or semiarid climate. But the Ethiopian Highlands and Mount Kilimanjaro have a highlands climate. In these areas, the higher land is cooler and wetter. The lower land is warmer and drier. The southern part of East Africa has a tropical wet and dry climate.

Central and Southern Africa

In this large sub-region, the land nearest the equator has a tropical wet climate. Farther south, the climate shifts to tropical wet and dry, and finally to arid or semiarid.

The climate shifts again in the southernmost part of this sub-region. Some coastal areas along the Indian Ocean have a marine west coast climate. People there enjoy warm summers, cool winters, and rainfall year round. Other coastal areas have a humid subtropical climate. Summers are hot with heavy rains. Winters are mild with some rain.

The large island of Madagascar has three climate zones. The eastern half has a tropical wet climate. The northwestern and central areas have a tropical wet and dry climate. The southwestern part has a semiarid climate.
Vegetation

About two-fifths of Africa’s land is tropical grassland. Another name for this vegetation zone is savanna. In addition to short and tall grasses, shrubs and trees are scattered over this rolling grassland. Both the grasses and trees are adapted to a tropical wet and dry climate. Many trees drop their leaves in the long dry season. Some have trunks that can store water. The grasses have long roots that reach for water deep in the earth.

North Africa

Desert and desert scrub cover most of North Africa. Few plants grow in the desert. Small trees, bushes, and other plants adapted to a dry climate make up desert scrub.

The land along the Mediterranean Sea is covered with chaparral plants. The small trees and bushes of this area are adapted to long, dry summers. A narrow strip of broadleaf evergreen forest runs along the Nile River through Egypt. Tropical grasslands cover the southern edge of the Sahara.

West Africa

Tropical grassland blankets much of West Africa. But over the years, some of this grassland has become desert. This has happened partly because of long dry periods with very little rain.

The southern part of West Africa is a broadleaf evergreen forest. This is also called rainforest. Many trees grow to 100 feet or taller. The shady floor of this forest zone gets little direct sunlight. As a result, few bushes or grasses grow there.

East Africa

Tropical grassland also covers most of East Africa. Some coastal lands are broadleaf evergreen forests. Much of Ethiopia lies in a highlands vegetation zone. There, the kinds of plants change with the altitude. Bamboo, cedar trees, and tree ferns grow in lower areas. On the higher slopes are meadows covered in grasses and flowers. Mosses and lichen grow near the mountaintops.

Central and Southern Africa

Broadleaf evergreen forest covers the Congo basin, which lies on the equator. Hundreds of kinds of trees live in this forest. South of this basin, most of the land is tropical grassland.

The Namib and most of the Kalahari have desert and desert scrub vegetation. The eastern Kalahari has tropical grassland. Mountain ranges in Southern Africa have highlands vegetation. The southern tip of this region is blanketed in chaparral.
Human Geography

Africa is home to 54 countries. The largest one is Algeria. It covers almost 1 million square miles. The smallest African country is Seychelles. This is a group of about 115 small islands scattered over the Indian Ocean, north of Madagascar. Together these islands have a land area of only about 177 square miles.

Africa is a region of many cultural and language groups. By some estimates, Africans speak at least 2,000 languages. Some of these, such as Arabic and Swahili, are widely used. Others are spoken only by small groups. Despite their differences, all Africans share a long history.
History
Scientists have found the bones of a humanlike species that lived in eastern Africa millions of years ago. For this reason, people call Africa the birthplace of the human race.

Early Times
Early African people were hunters and gatherers. Learning to farm changed the way people lived. By 5000 B.C.E., Africans were raising animals and growing crops.

The Nile River valley was home to one of the world’s earliest civilizations. The Egyptian civilization lasted for more than 3,000 years. The ancient Egyptians invented a kind of paper and a form of picture writing. They learned how to preserve the bodies of the dead as mummies. They also built the Egyptian pyramids, which still stand today.

Kingdoms and Colonies
Beginning around 300 C.E., three great kingdoms arose in West Africa. The first one, Ghana, ruled until the mid–11th century. After the fall of Ghana, the kingdom of Mali rose to power. The last of the three, the Songhai empire, rose and fell between 1400 and 1600.

The wealth of these kingdoms came from their control of trade across the Sahara. Arab traders from North Africa brought salt and copper from mines in the Sahara to West African markets. They traded these goods for gold, ivory, and slaves. The traders carried their faith with them. They spread the religion of Islam across much of Africa.

Europeans began to explore Africa in the 1400s. The Portuguese set up trading posts along the west coast of Africa. At first they were interested in gold. But they soon began to ship Africans to Europe as slaves.

The slave trade expanded after Europeans set up colonies in the Americas. The European colonists needed workers to help them raise crops like sugar and tobacco. To meet that need, millions of Africans were captured and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean as slaves. The Atlantic slave trade did not end until around 1850.

In the 1700s and 1800s, Europeans began setting up colonies in Africa. The Belgians took control of the Congo basin. France gained control of Algeria and Tunisia. Great Britain took over Egypt. By 1914, European countries had divided up most of Africa.

The Modern Era
In 1957, Ghana became the first black African colony to gain its independence. Over the next 10 years, most of Africa threw off colonial rule. Few of the new countries were prepared for self-rule. Since gaining their independence, they have struggled to create stable governments. Tensions between ethnic groups have led to unrest in many countries.
In 2002, most African countries came together to form the African Union. The African Union helps its members work together for the benefit of all Africans. It promotes peace and human rights. It also works to improve public health.

### Africa Timeline

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>5000 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Egyptian civilization</td>
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<td>3100 B.C.E.-332 C.E.</td>
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<td>300–1600</td>
<td>West Africa kingdoms</td>
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<td>1450–1850</td>
<td>Atlantic slave trade</td>
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<tr>
<td>1657–1914</td>
<td>European colonization</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957–1994</td>
<td>Colonies win their independence</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>African Union formed</td>
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### Population

As of 2017, about 1.3 billion people lived in Africa. This is one-seventh of the world’s people. Only Asia has more people. Africa has the fastest growing population in the world.

About three-fifths of Africans live in rural areas. Most of them live in small villages, much as their ancestors did. In recent years, however, a growing number of Africans have been moving to cities.


More than 20 million people practice indigenous religions. There are hundreds of these local faiths. But they have many features in common. Like most other religions, they explain how the universe was created. They also teach what is right and wrong.
Economic Activity

Mining is an important economic activity in Africa. Mining is the process of digging minerals and coal out of the ground. Mining most likely began in Africa thousands of years ago. Today, half of the value of Africa’s exports is from mining. There are many methods of mining. Each method depends on where a mineral deposit is located. When the deposit is near the surface, mining can be done in large, open pits. When the deposit is deep underground, miners must dig tunnels to reach it. Both open pit and underground mines are used in Africa to get at its mineral wealth.

Resources

Oil is a key resource in parts of North and West Africa. Much of the oil imported into Europe comes from this region. Central and Southern Africa are centers for diamond mines. In fact, Africa produces over two-thirds of the world’s diamonds. Gold is another important resource. More gold is mined in Central and Southern Africa than in any other region of the world.
As African countries continue to develop, the importance of trade and manufacturing will increase. There will be more jobs for higher skilled workers, like this worker in South Africa.

**Land Use**

The grasslands of North and East Africa are used for **nomadic herding**. Herders move from place to place to find food and water for their animals.

The majority of rural areas of Africa depend on **subsistence farming**. This means that the farmers are raising just enough food to feed their families.

In recent years, many Africans have turned to **commercial farming**. Egyptian farmers raise cotton along the Nile River and in the Nile Delta. Large groves of date palms grow around oases in the Sahara. The rainforests of West Africa produce cocoa beans. These are used to make chocolate.

Manufacturing is growing throughout Africa. Most of this trade and manufacturing is currently centered in South Africa, but it is quickly spreading to other nations throughout the continent. Manufacturing in Africa includes cars, clothing, steel, and electronics.