Part I

African and Other Roots

Chapter One

Life and Work in West Africa

Augustine Konneh

This chapter depicts the everyday lives of various inhabitants of this region. It describes and interprets the social, economic, cultural, and religious activities in which Africans were engaged as they searched for self-fulfillment as individuals and as members of communities and groups. This is not ethnography, but rather a historical and historiographical essay on the period from ancient times to the era of the African Slave Trade.

West African Institutions

Family

One outstanding feature of the communal structure of West African societies was the importance of the family and the ever-present consciousness of ties of kinship. When one speaks of the family in an African context, one is referring not to the nuclear family – husband, wife, and children – but to kin, the extended family, which comprises a large number of blood relatives who trace their descent from a common ancestor. The family was held together by a sense of obligation one to the other. Early African family values included solidarity, mutual helpfulness, interdependence, and concern for the well-being of every individual member of a society – the highest and most spontaneous expression. Indeed, as Gyekye (1996) has indicated, the African extended family system was held as a fundamental value, both social and moral. Thus, each member of the family was brought up to think of himself or herself always and primarily in relationship to the group as a cohesive unit. Each family member was required to seek to bring honor to the group. The children had obligations to their parents and parents had obligations to their children. Both the children and parents also had obligations to the members of the extended families – brothers, sisters, in-laws, cousins, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, and so on.

These were the elements of strong family ties that people of African descent brought with them to the Americas. Scholars, such as Blassingame (1972), Herskovits

(1941), and Gutman (1976), have observed the strength of the family in the survival of Africans in the Americas. Unlike E. Franklin Frazier (1939), who in his work *The Negro Family* postulated that Africans in the Americas brought no elements of the family with them, Gutman and Herskovits argue that African family resilience was transmitted to the Americas and, thus, assisted in Africans' survival both during slavery and freedom. In fact, historically, West African family or lineage constituted a clan whose members might reside in the same area and share a number of common activities and interests. These lineages performed diverse functions including economic, educational, religious, social, and cultural. The lineages often acted as authoritative bodies for enforcing roles of behavior and, in the case of interlineage strife, for resolving such conflict through mediation or arbitration by a council of elders (McCall 1995).

John McCall discusses the formation of West African lineages in pre-slavery times through such principles as matrilineality, patrilineality, matrilocal residence and patrilocal residence (1995). These were principles that governed inheritance and citizenship in a community. All relationships were subsumed under the concept of kinship network. In West Africa, as elsewhere, some kin were adopted – what is sometimes called a feticious principle of kinship. Status, legal rights, and identity emanating from kinship are still clearly to be observed in modern West Africa, where the continued significance of kinship is expressed in ethnic politics.

The lineage in West Africa was the custodian of wealth and all economic assets. Production assets, such as land and labor, were in the hands of the family. McCall asserts, for example, that in many parts of West Africa land used for farming or the houses and land where people lived were not considered to "belong" to the people who utilized them. Instead, this property was held by a community, which claimed descent from a common ancestor. In some societies this descent was reckoned through the male line. This was the case in the establishment of a business that relied on the support of the family in terms of putting up the resources and providing the required labor. The male head of the family or lineage administered property in the interests of all family members, particularly males, because of the patrilineal nature of descent in many West African societies (Vaughan 1986).

The family was responsible for the upbringing of children in West Africa. Their proper nurturing was essential for the continuity of the family, lineage, and clan. Children, therefore, were not considered primarily as individuals but, instead, belonged to the family and the community. Everyone was expected to be a keeper of one's neighbor's child (Azevedo 1998). Thus, the popular saying, "It takes a village to bring up a child," was a way of life in West Africa. As Azevedo (1998) reports, because of the continuity of lineage through children, many people in West Africa desired to have many children and to do what they could to assist them to become successful and wealthy, because these children were their legacy. The children would care for them in their old age, give them a glorious burial when they died, and keep their memory alive long after they had passed on. Some obvious benefits of this practice in child rearing included the prevention of vagrancy and crime. Thus, it was not surprising that incidences of rape, child abuse, and molestation were rare. Although changes have occurred because of Western influence, the family remains a highly valued cornerstone of society.

Marriage

Many marriages in traditional West Africa were inextricably related to kinship. Marriage was governed by a variety of rules. Some of these rules were exogamous (marriage outside the family line) in their basis, and others were endogamous (marriage inside the family line). McCall advances the idea that marriage between persons who in English would be classified as cousins was practiced in some West African societies. Marriages between cross-cousins (children of the marriages of a brother and sister) were the more preferred arrangements, whereas a marriage between parallel cousins (children of the marriages of two brothers or two sisters) would be forbidden as incestuous. Those marriages based on exogamous practice were designed to create alliances between two lineages (McCall 1995).

Marriages in West Africa were arranged relatively early in the life of adults. Sometimes future partners were earmarked in childhood for the purpose of solidifying social relationships. As Adepoju noted (1992 and 1997), marriage in the African sense was the traditionally recognized point of entry into family formation. It was, indeed, a complex affair. For example, identification of a bride (or groom), consolidation of the search through payment of bride price, formation of the rites of marriage, consummation of marriage – all of these components of the process were arranged by families who also had an enduring responsibility to ensure the stability of the union through a variety of controls and a mutual support network (Adepoju 1992). Thus, the overall good of the families was considered to be more important than the desires of the two individuals involved. McCall notes that the practice of arranged marriages reflects the fact that marriage in West Africa was not concerned only with building a family, it was concerned also with the construction and maintenance of a larger network of relationships within the community as a whole (McCall 1995). To West Africans, marriage by no means involved just two individuals. Rather, it was an alliance between two extended families of the bride and groom. Therefore, even the choice of a fiancé(e) required careful consultation with relatives and close friends. If the father or mother in either family was against his or her child's selection, the chances for the young people getting married were rather slim (Azevedo 1998).

The existence of different cultural values, customs, and taboos among various ethnic groups required a careful examination of any inter-ethnic marriages. The backgrounds – social and sentimental histories of the prospective wife or husband – were closely scrutinized. For instance, among the Akan of Ghana, a literal investigation was discreetly carried out to check for "skeletons in the closet." Within this context, it is easy to understand how appalled West Africans still are to hear that Americans may decide to marry people from totally strange origins, sometimes without even knowing much of their fiancé(e)'s family background.

Once the choice of a mate had been approved, the marriage procedure could begin. The traditional version of the wedding took place before the modern one. It involved a meeting of the bride and groom, a number of relatives – parents did not attend this ceremony – and maybe a couple of brothers or sisters of the groom. The ritual was performed in the bride's family's house. A few weeks before the gathering, the future husband's relatives offered several expensive items. Those usually included some traditional fabrics and vintage alcoholic beverages. During the

actual ceremony, the elders on the bride's side would pour some of the beverages on the ground, uttering prayers to the ancestors' spirits. In these prayers, they wished for a peaceful marriage, many children, and harmonious relations between the two families. At this stage, the couple was actually considered married (McCall 1995).

Once the traditional ceremony was completed, the couple could start a new life, confident that they had all of the familial framework to support the marriage in times of difficulties. This was actually the main reason why, according to Robertson (1995), young West Africans would rather not get married against their parents' advice. For example, a spiritual curse implied a very unhappy relationship, since the marriage was not blessed by the family. Then, in case of crisis, parents could not be called upon to provide their expertise at conjugal trials. Among the Akan people of Ghana, when husband and wife proved unable to resolve their differences, they resorted to older brothers or sisters, marriage witnesses, or very close friends. If all those options failed, the last resort for mediation lay with the parents or elders.

For instance, a husband might have found no satisfactory compromise in discussing his wife's cousins' or brothers' extended stays in his home. A meeting would have to be called eventually to settle the protracted dispute. Parents, brothers, sisters, marriage witnesses, and/or any person aware of the couple's problems would be present to discuss various alternatives with the spouses. For such a conference to be summoned, the taboo word of "divorce" had probably been uttered by one of the parties. The couple would be urged to speak out frankly and expose any hidden element that might give some insight into the causes for tension. A decision had to be reached by the end of the session. At times, the meeting would last several hours, until the family had determined who was responsible for the trouble and had devised a way of avoiding its recurrence. The wronged party would finally be asked to forgive his or her spouse and to promise that such a crisis would never occur again. If the council was proven wrong, the spouse had to inform the members, who would call for another, more dramatic meeting. A large number of relatives would participate in the discussion because it would be seen as imperative that the situation be solved through family channels and not in court.

The preceding example demonstrates why it was vital for a married West African literally to "pamper" the in-laws in difficult times, as they would play a crucial and moderating role in, perhaps, saving a marriage. To some married West Africans, however, having to take into account their own extended family's opinions, plus those of their in-laws, was viewed as an immense nuisance, on top of the complication of the traditional relationship where the husband was custodian to the wife. Yet, in the final analysis, the concept of marriage as a concern of all the blood relatives could save a couple the cost and trauma of having to seek professional help with counselors or therapists. The extended familial network, in effect, was designed to provide all the psychological and material support needed in times of crisis.

Indigenous African Religion

The awareness of the existence of some ultimate, Supreme Being who is the origin and sustainer of this universe – and the establishment of constant ties with this being – influenced, in a comprehensive way, the thoughts and actions of the West African people (Gyekye 1996). The West African heritage was intensely religious.

The African world into which European Christian missionaries entered in the late seventeenth century was a religious world in which the idea of God as the Supreme Being was already known and held by the West African people. In a study of African Religions and Philosophy, Professor Mbiti (1975) noted that "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its religious system with a set of beliefs and practices." This implies that religion permeated into all the aspects of African life so fully that it was not easy or possible always to isolate it. Thus, in African religion, there was no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African was, there was his/her religion; the early Africans carried their religions with them, wherever they would find themselves. It is also important to note that there were no sacred scriptures in African religions. Religion in West African societies was written not on paper but in people's hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders, and even kings. Everyone was a potential carrier of religion. African religions had neither founders nor reformers. These religions did, however, incorporate national heroes, heroines, leaders, rulers, and other famous men and women into their body of beliefs and mythology. Belief in the continuation of life after death was found in all African societies.

Certainly up to the period of the major European incursions into West Africa, the vast majority of the African people engaged in religious practices that were indigenous to the continent. These practices were only outward manifestations of certain religious beliefs and, like symbols in other religions, they did not indicate the specific character of the religion. The religion of early West Africans can most accurately be described as ancestor worship. West Africans believed that the spirits of their ancestors had unlimited power over their lives. In this, as in almost every aspect of West African life, the kinship group was important. It was devoutly believed that the spirit that dwelled in a relative was deified upon death and that it continued to live and take an active interest in the family. The spirits of early ancestors had been free to wield an influence for such a long time that they were much more powerful than the spirits of the more recently deceased; hence, the devout worship and the complete deification of early ancestors. Not only were the spirits of deceased members of the family worshiped, but also a similar high regard was held for the spirits that dwelt on the family land, in the trees and rocks in the community of the kinship group, and in the sky above the community.

Because of the family character of African religions, the priests of the religions were the patriarchs of the families. They were the oldest living descendants of the initial ancestor and had therefore inherited the earthly prerogatives of their predecessors. Thus, they had dominion over the family grounds, water, and atmosphere. It was the family patriarch who entered into communication with the souls of his ancestors and natural forces in his immediate vicinity. Consequently, he was authorized to conduct ceremonies of worship. The temples of worship could be any structures set aside for that purpose. They contained holy objects, such as bones of the dead, consecrated pieces of wood, rock, or metal, and statuettes representing objects to be worshiped. Bells or rattles were used to invoke the spirits and the worshipers. The blood of victims – chickens, sheep, goats, or human beings – was offered as a sacrifice to appease the gods. The practice of sacrificing human beings in

Africa was never a universal one, but, in some areas, prisoners and captives were sacrificed during the worship of various deities. Libations of palm wine, beer, or other fermented drinks were offered in various forms of worship. Prayers and songs were expressions of adoration.

It was only natural that in a society such as that found in West Africa there would be considerable reliance on the magical power of amulets, talismans, and the like. Anything that helped to explain and answer the imponderables was a welcome addition to tribal practices. Magic was, therefore, practiced on a grand scale. By resorting to ill-defined powers, known only to him, the magician invented techniques and created rites designed to secure for individuals the specific ends they desired. Where religion was a collective attempt to secure satisfaction for the kinship groups, magic was an individual attempt to achieve certain satisfactions on the part of a particular person. Even in areas where animistic worship prevailed, belief in magic was widespread. Many Africans had great confidence in the efficacy of magical practices, and it may be that the reliance on the divination of sorcerers was responsible in part for the course that the civilization of West Africa took.

The elaborateness of funeral rites all over the continent attests to the regard that Africans had for the idea that the spirits of the dead played an important part in the life of the kinship groups. The funeral was the climax of life; costly and extensive rituals were held as sacred obligations of the survivors. The dead were generally buried in the ground either beneath the huts in which they lived or in cemeteries. Burial often took place within a few days after death, but at times the family delayed interment for several weeks or longer. The grave was not completely closed until every member of the family had an opportunity to present offerings and to participate in some rite pertinent to interment. Nothing more clearly demonstrates the cohesiveness of the African family than the ceremonies and customs practiced on the occasion of the death and burial of a member.

Franklin (2000) suggests that in all probability the early influence of Islam on the African way of life has been greatly exaggerated. This is certainly true during the period before the fourteenth century. Muslims crossed from Arabia over into Egypt in the seventh century. In the following century, they swept across North Africa where they met with notable success, but religious conversion was slow south of the Sahara. Africanists such as Basil Davidson (1994), Kevin Shillington (1995), and Robert July (1992) agree that the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and the Songhay accepted Islamic faith quite reluctantly, while other groups rejected it altogether. Some African kings accepted Islam, along with their subjects, for what appear now to be economic and political reasons. However, they frequently and tenaciously held to their tribal religious practices. Muslims were never able, for example, to win over the people of Mali, Hausaland, and Yorubaland. The commercial opportunities offered by the Muslims were especially attractive. It must also be added that the followers of the Prophet accepted Africans as social equals and gave them the opportunity to enjoy the advantages of education and cultural advancement, which the religion offered. Even as a slave, the black Muslim was considered a brother. To many black Africans these features were doubtless as important as the purely ritualistic aspects of the new religion. Even so, large numbers of Africans resoundingly rejected Islam in favor of a preference for the cults and rituals that were historically a part of their way of life.

Christianity, in contrast, was entrenched in North Africa early. It was when Islam made its appearance in the seventh century that the two great faiths engaged in a life-and-death struggle for the control of the area. In West Africa, where the population was especially dense and from which the great bulk of slaves was secured, Christianity was practically unknown until the Portuguese began to establish missions in the area in the sixteenth century. It was a strange religion, this Christianity, that taught equality and brotherhood and at the same time introduced on a large scale the practice of tearing people from their homes and transporting them to a distant land to become slaves. If the Africans south of the Sahara were slow to accept Christianity, it was not only because they were attached to their particular forms of tribal worship but also because they did not have the superhuman capacity to reconcile in their own minds the contradictory character of the new religion.

Diviners and Other Supernatural Powers

Divination in West African religion was vital because it told priests, patients, and the entire community what ritual they must perform. Successful diviners were highly intelligent and often high-strung men or (occasionally) women. They were often also physically handicapped. Divination was one of the specialties most likely to attract the person with an intellectual bent. Diviners had to possess an excellent intuitive knowledge of the societies in which they lived – and often the knowledge was not merely intuitive but could be made explicit. They also had to be men and women of courage. The diviners were the ones who were putting their fingers on, and brought into the open, the inadequacies and the sore spots in day-to-day living. Unless they were strong and forceful, they could be cowed. Many diviners who completed their training never practiced, specifically because they could "not stand the heat in the kitchen" (Stewart 1984).

Most indigenous African religions believed that, were it not for the workings of the forces of evil, human beings would live forever in health and happiness. Therefore, when disease and misery struck, the source had to be rooted out. That source contained two elements. There was, on the one hand, the cause of the difficulty. Africans, within their knowledge, were as sensible about cause as anyone else, and most of them knew that some diseases were communicable and that droughts appeared in recurring cycles. Cause in this sense, however, left certain questions unanswered – all of the "why" questions. Therefore, misfortune had not only a cause but it had a source of motivation as well.

The very fact that misfortune struck was an indication that all was not well in the world and in the cosmos. The cause and motivation of the misfortune had to be discovered. Contrary to westerners, who were not trained to ask questions about misfortune, Africans did seek answers in such situations. In arriving at answers, they linked social problems to divine action. In so doing, they exposed and often solved the social problems in the course of seeking to counter the divine manifestations.

The first thing a person had to do when misfortune struck was to go to a diviner to discover the device which was used to bring it about and, perhaps, also to discern the author of the misfortune. That author might have been a spirit to whom insufficient attention had been paid or an ancestor who was punishing a descendant for immorality, or spiritual shortcomings in the group of his descendants. Or it may

have been a "witch" who was a human author of evil, venting his or her anger, envy, or selfishness (Stewart 1984).

African diviners used many modes of carrying out their task of obtaining an answer to the misfortune. For example, they threw palm nuts and read answers to their queries in the juxtaposition of the fallen kernels. They tossed chains of snake bones. They rubbed carved oracle boards together. They also became possessed, and received their answers through a spiritual intermediary. These methods were means of seeking results in solving problems, which were not understood by outsiders.

In contemporary scholarship, it is important to note several issues as they relate to the in-depth investigation and study of African traditional religions as an academic discipline. These issues primarily center on the debate over the reference to African traditional religion in the singular or plural, methodology, and interpretation. African scholars who adhere to the philosophies of E. B. Idowu consistently contend that scholars and critics should refer to the "religion" under the rubric of *One African Traditional Religion*. J. S. Mbiti, on the other hand, insists that there is an insufficient and unstable foundation for such a premise. He does accept the commonly held belief of the existence of a single, basic religious philosophy for Africa, yet he is insistent in his assertion of the existence of [as many] religions in the sub-Saharan African background in tandem with the number of ethno-language groups. Mbiti contends, "We speak of African religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system" (Mbiti 1969: 1–2). Further, as it relates to the issue of nomenclature, Mbiti asserts that Christianity and Islam should – in contemporary scholastic study – be viewed as indigenous and traditional religions of Africa due to the longevity of their historical existence in the continent (Mbiti 1975: 223).

While scholars remain divided on the views emanating from Mbiti and Idowu, recent scholarship pervasively embraces the use of African Traditional Religion in the singular. These scholars contend that the common world-view within these religions, as well as the similarity in rituals, belief-systems, value formulations, and institutional formation across the vast African continent, provide a basic and firm foundation for maintaining the reference to a singular form in referring to African traditional religions even while accepting and acknowledging (contemporaneously) the existence of a burgeoning number of denominations.

In the systematic, contemporary approach to the study of African traditional religion, it is important to note that the religion is based in orality. It is a religion and movement that maintains its authenticity and accuracy largely through a reliance on the transmission and interpretation through socio-cultural networks of verbal communication. For the most part, the tenets of African traditional religion are not to be found in sacred books but in the substance and continuity of historically-transmitted daily behaviors and more stylized ritualized practices. It is, therefore, quite clear that African traditional religion is one based in local, folk-based formulations. The African peoples embraced and assimilated the religion of their ancestors in a worship-based tradition that pervasively refers back to the local shrines and oracles.

The orality and folk-based foundations of African religion contribute to the complexity in the interpretation of the materials of the study of the religion. Scholars of various backgrounds – historically and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

– have contributed and continue to contribute their various perspectives to the study of African traditional religion. This creates a complex situation due to the training and backgrounds of many of the most prominent scholars in the field. The scholars' backgrounds and training are diverse, with some emerging as evolutionists, diffusionists, ethnographers, social anthropologists, and Christian scholars. Contemporary students and scholars face a critical challenge in deciding how these various scholars' backgrounds may have both negatively and positively contributed to what currently exists as the scholarship on traditional African religious expression and experience. Several critics of the current scholarly formulations, such as Newell S. Booth, Jr, R. Horton, and Okot p'Bitek, keenly question the validity and stability of some historical and critical materials. Booth, for example, asserts, "Many Western students of Africa – historians of religions, anthropologists, and others – exploit Africa for their own academic or ideological purposes" (Booth 1977: 4). Okot p'Bitek goes further to label some African scholars as "intellectual smugglers" (p'Bitek 1971: 107) who portray African deities "as mercenaries in foreign battles, none of which was in the interest of African peoples" (p'Bitek 1971: 102).

What emerges as most important in the debate, methodology, and interpretation of African traditional religion is the acknowledgement of the continuity of the religion. How can the student, scholar, and critic move to a more lucid and accurate description of African traditional religion? Wilfred Cantell Smith offers sound advice: "anyone who writes about a religion other than his own today does so, in effect, in the presence of those about whom he is speaking . . . no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers" (quoted in Booth 1977: 4).

Islam and Christianity

Islam has had a history of about a thousand years in West Africa. It was carried into the region and the continent through trade in the eighth century by Arab traders from North Africa. Today, in the northern part of West Africa from Senegal to Nigeria, nearly 90 percent of the population is Muslim. The northern parts of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ghana also have substantial adherents to the Islamic faith. The spread of Islam is credited to the traders, who were often accompanied by clerics who set up Islamic schools and embarked upon the conversion of non-Muslims. Most of the Muslims in West Africa are Sunni (Konneh 1996).

Christianity has operated in West Africa for centuries. Many countries in the region – such as Cote D'Ivoire, Liberia, Ghana, and Sierra Leone – have traditionally had great Christian influence. In the nineteenth century, missionary movements (Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Lutheran) spread into the region and many inhabitants were attracted to Christianity. These missionaries set up Western schools and clinics and attracted the locals to them. The result was conversion to the religion because of what it offered socially as well as spiritually (Keim 1995).

West Africans, however, made their own adaptations of Christianity and Islam – introducing elements from their own traditions, such as approaches to healing, veneration of the dead, Africanized rituals, and music. In some cases this led to conflict with the established leaders of church and state. Another expression of religion in West African cities was the evolution of indigenous Christian churches.

A compelling example is the Aladura religious movement among the Yoruba in Nigeria. Aladura, which literally means “owner of prayer,” is the generic name for a group of Christians whose origin goes back to the late nineteenth century, and whose religious doctrine centered on the healing power of prayer. The physical assurance of this doctrine, if one is ever needed, is provided by the water which, when blessed, is believed to be endowed with divine power (Jegede 1995).

In cities, religious syncretism was a major force. Some West Africans differed substantially in their mode of worship, some only marginally so, but all worshiped the same God according to West African people. Many people who professed Christianity or Islam, nominally at least, broke down religious boundaries by participating at will in the observance of some aspects of traditional religion. In urban society, where people came in contact with new ideas and values, syncretism became relevant. It allowed a degree of tolerance and mutuality. For example, Christians and Muslims alike could participate in rites, rituals, festivals, and other observances inherited from their ancestors. These practices continue [today] in spite of the imposing presence of religious edifices (Mazrui 1986).

In several cities in West Africa, annual religious festivals brought together “sons of the soil,” to use the local parlance, who were drawn from far and near by the excitement of the occasion. Christian and Muslim alike delighted in joining the traditionalists in reenacting the pact of their religion, respecting the sacred shrine of the goddesses who would, in return, protect the city and ensure its prosperity.

Education and Power Associations

The Power Associations (secret societies) were responsible for the education of the young in traditional West Africa. They served to integrate the people of a community into a harmonious entity. They also provided the framework for teaching the youth how to live in relation with themselves and with everyone in the community. Konneh (1996) observed that in Liberia, to this day, most Mel- and Mande-speaking groups feature the Poro society for males and the Sande society for females. One of the principal purposes of the societies was that they defined interests and activities in terms of community instead of exclusively along lineage or clan lines. The roles the Poro, Sande, and other societies played may be summarized by noting that they provided social and vocational education, operated various social services, which ranged from medical treatment to recreation, and oversaw economic and political activities. All youths had to be initiated into their respective association before they could be considered adults and, consequently, contributing members of the community. The initiation schools, which the officials of the societies conducted for the youth to prepare them for membership in the associations, were located in an area physically remote from the village, and the sessions could take up to three or four years. Now, they usually take only a few weeks (Konneh 1996).

Kenneth Little (1951) has assessed the significance of the rite of passage that was associated with the associations in cultivating the minds and behaviors of young people in West African societies. He argues that the rite of passage provided the intellect, continuation of the group, and training that was practical in solving societies’ problems. Thus, for Little, the rite of passage served as a public institution.

The power associations were the principal institutions that upheld traditional beliefs and practices. They served as binding forces – the core of community life. Their basic belief was that some extraordinary force allowed association members to speak with "one voice," which provided a systematic means for everyone to share a set of behaviors and moral codes that contributed to the continuity of society. Each Poro or Sande lodge was built near a sacred shrine, which included the graves of the town's founding elders and the past leaders of the associations. Membership in the power associations was compulsory and passage through them was an important prerequisite for persons to be considered as adult participants in society. Initiates of both associations were accountable to God through the ancestral and the cultic spirits. Cultural guidelines were also taught during instruction of initiates. Violators were tried by the Poro society, which also carried out the prescribed punishment (Konneh 1996).

Because they were veiled in secrecy, much that has been said and written about the power associations has been either fanciful or speculative. For example, Alice Walker – in her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* – condemned the Sande practice of a rite of passage that involved cutting of the clitoris of girls. She believed this practice to be inhuman, cruel, and hazardous to the health of young girls. Even in light of such questionable practices, the importance of the Poro and Sande cannot be underestimated. The Poro assumed a higher authoritative role than the Sande and wielded executive, judicial, and legislative authority in indigenous society. It maintained law, order, and decorum in communities; capital punishment was in the hands of its leaders. The association also mobilized men and women for labor and supervised market operations. Men also solidified and maintained their dominance over women by removing boys from their mothers and initiating them in the manner prescribed by Poro's god.

The chief and other leaders in the Poro hierarchy controlled large farms. As a part of the initiation process, boys worked on these farms to support themselves, to cultivate crops, and to "laid" (work on) the farms of others in an effort to help the chief generate revenues to meet the public's needs. Similar activities were engaged in by the Sande initiates, in that girls performed such tasks on the farms as weeding and harvesting the crops (Ray 1976).

The Poro and the Sande combined the powers of both the ancestors and the nature divinities. It was through the interaction of various spirit components and the power manifested through the power associations that order was maintained and balanced, and well-being for humans was preserved. The Poro and Sande provided different intermediary relationships with their respective authoritative entities in the spirit world. The origins of the spirit guardians were embedded in the power associations' myth and lore. For instance, in the Sande a male ancestral water spirit was impersonated by a masked dancer. However, in the Poro, the key spirit was the "bush spirit"; it was not impersonated by a masked dancer. Although they both have natural divinity, the "bush spirit" of the Poro was considered more powerful than the ancestral spirit impersonated by the Sande masked dancer. When asked where the Sande masked dancer came from, many Africans responded that they found it near the river or that it came from the water. This belief was shared by all of the female respondents, some of whom were quoted as saying that they pledged more respect to the masked impersonator than to their real-life husbands. The bearer of the mask

of the ancestral water spirit was always a high-ranking Sande member. Other Sande masks, however, had no spiritual significance and were borne by low-ranking members. Those masks were used more for socialization and entertainment (Ray 1976).

The power associations were often characterized by members as important factors in an elaborate life drama. It was the power associations that first combined men and women into corporate units and allied them with the forces in the spirit world. In their roles as guardians of sacred and social values, they represented the central core of a society's world view, which was dramatically played out in Poro and Sande rituals and ceremonies. These rituals and ceremonies operated in cycle of life dramas whose themes centered on gender rivalry and the shifting power of their tutelary nature-spirit guardians.

Both the Poro and the Sande played central roles in the funeral rites of their members. Among the power associations' members were those who possessed specialized skills as morticians, doctors, and grave-diggers for the purpose of funeral functions. The collective consciousness of the associations was brought to bear in the funerary ceremonies, especially those of chiefs and high-ranking power association officials. The corpses of such officials were not seen by non-members, not even by relatives. The specialists of the associations were in charge until the final burial.

The authority and respect wielded by chiefs and other leaders was supplemented by their ritual authority, which they held as highly-placed members of the power associations. As religious practices comprised a major part of political leaders' sanctions and powers, rulers often participated in traditional religious activities, such as leading the celebrations at the time of a funeral or pouring libations to ensure a bountiful harvest.

To a large extent the power associations excluded outsiders; only in a few instances were they allowed to join. These power associations particularly resented the encroachment of Islamic and Christian religious practices, especially the use of magical charms and medicine, on their spiritual territory. Also, there well may have been a reluctance by Muslims to join the associations because of their belief that to associate anything with God contravenes the concept of *shirk* (the Muslim belief that God is one) while the associations were adherents of African traditional religions which encompass a belief in a pantheon of gods.

West African Economic Activities

Occupations in the Forest

The forest regions of southern West Africa – Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria – run along the coast and stretch about 200 miles inland. Most of the West African forests were not technically rain forests because they did not receive enough rainfall. Rainforests need approximately 70 inches of rainfall a year with no completely dry season. Most of the West African forest region had at least one dry season. The people in the rural areas earned their living in many different ways. The major occupations in traditional West Africa were trade, agriculture, fishing, blacksmithing, herding (pastoralism), and hunting. These occupations served as the major economies for peoples in the rainforest and savanna regions of West Africa.

People used peanuts, fruits, and palm products directly from the forests. However, in most areas, farmers cut the trees to grow crops. In traditional farming, some of the larger trees were left because they were too difficult to cut down and because they provided shade. Most of the smaller trees were cut and the areas were burned. The ash from the burned trees increased the fertility of the soil. The farmer then planted cassava or cocoyams, but after a few years, the soil lost its fertility. Bananas could be planted on the less fertile land. However, eventually the land was abandoned and was allowed to regain its fertility. The new forest would grow back in forty to fifty years. While it looked like the original forest, it usually had fewer species. Almost all of the forests in West Africa were cut at least once. Palm trees also may have been planted instead of allowing the traditional forest to regrow (McNulty 1995).

Most farms in the forest region had several crops, which reached maturity at different times. Farmers planted cocoa trees that took from five to seven years to mature and bear fruit, but they continued to yield for several years. Swamp rice, peanuts, rubber palms, coffee, and oil palms were also grown as cash crops in the forest region. Farmers grew yams, plantains, bananas, cocoyams, cassava, corn, rice, peppers, okra, onions, tomatoes, and various fruits, such as oranges and pineapples, to eat themselves.

Agriculture was the keystone of West Africa's prosperous economies of the forest region. A large percentage of the rural population was engaged in crop growing, which was used for subsistence as well as for export. By the end of the nineteenth century many West African farmers in the forest area took advantage of relatively favorable market opportunities to open up extensive areas for cultivation and to accumulate productive capital in the form of coffee, cocoa, and rubber trees. As their incomes from the sale of export crops increased, so did their expenditures on a variety of domestically produced goods, ranging from foodstuffs to furniture, which in turn created new opportunities for expanded production and commerce with the region. Tree crop farmers also invested part of their earnings in other forms of capital, including trade, transport, and housing, and in such public facilities as schools, clinics, and market stalls. They also often paid school fees for their children and other young relatives, thus contributing to the growth of an educated labor force.

Throughout the forest zone the tsetse fly prevented people from keeping cattle. Most villages, however, had sheep, goats, and poultry. The forest regions, of course, provided plenty of wood for building materials and for making furniture and household implements. Large, elaborately carved homes could be found in some of the forest regions. Wood carving was a major art form for some of the people of this region.

While agriculture and wood carving were central occupations, the use of iron was also a central aspect of economic activity in West Africa. Kathy Schick (1995) pointed out that several West African kingdoms benefited significantly from their trade in iron, beginning in the ninth century. After Arab traders began to reach West Africa by the ninth and tenth centuries, the developing and expanding trade networks begun to evolve into iron-age societies, which enhanced the development of large urban communities and the centralization of political power in the West African kingdoms that regulated the trade. John Hope Franklin (2000) contends

that West Africans were involved in the iron trade long before the Europeans. He argues that Africans exported for many years, with evidence emanating from the large numbers of blacksmiths and other iron workers in the region.

Blacksmithing was indispensable to the forest region. Smiths forged implements from scrap metal over a charcoal fire, using hand-worked hide bellows. In the nineteenth century, they kept the techniques of the profession secret from others. Only blacksmiths were allowed to work iron, wood, or clay. The Mandinka people of West Africa were and still are excellent blacksmiths – highly skilled and respected artisans who have been plying their ancient and fundamental craft for generations, forging the same vital products and employing the same technology. Mandinka blacksmiths smelted ores when necessary, but preferred to use imported iron when it was available (Konneh 1996).

Blacksmiths manufactured guns for hunting and made drums for chiefs. They were particularly significant for agricultural tools such as hoes, knives, and cutlasses. The farmers depended on blacksmiths for these supplies, which were cheaper than those manufactured in Europe. In addition to farm implements, blacksmiths produced domestic utensils and weapons using a few raw materials and tools such as fire, charcoal, a rooted iron anvil, tongs, skin bellows, and a variety of hammers (McNaughton 1988).

The craft of blacksmithing was basically hereditary in that sons inherited the occupation directly, mainly patrilineally. At the same time, the profession was open to newcomers. Unrelated youths, perhaps the son of a neighbor or affinal relative, were sometimes taken on by smiths as apprentices and taught the difficult skills of the craft. The profession of blacksmithing was more an honorable, than a money-making, endeavor. Despite the men's special skills, few artists earned a living at their trade in blacksmithing and nearly all were part-time specialists, who were also agriculturists like those found in other regions. The products produced by blacksmiths served the basic needs of the community, and, for the most part, practical needs were simply met.

Savanna

Tall grass and trees make up the plants of the savanna region in West Africa. Savanna regions are found from Senegal southward to Sierra Leone, and eastward to central Nigeria. In the rainy season, savanna looks like a park with green grass and widely spaced trees. The grasses are tall and include elephant grass, which burns easily in the dry season. Rivers are usually lined with trees. In some savanna areas, particularly in Ghana, vegetation is often clumped around termite mounds. Many crops such as millet, guinea corn, and yams grow. As the savanna fades into the desert and rainfall goes below 15 inches a year, vegetation changes. Grasses and bushes become sparse and succulents become common. Some botanists believe that the savanna was once forest, which was changed to grassland by humans and fire. Some of Africa's grasslands are the result of man's burning forests or using them for cultivation and animal grazing.

In the savanna there are rainy seasons in the period from the end of April to September and dry seasons from October to March. During the dry season, trees lose their leaves, and grass turns brown. By the end of the dry season, grasses have

usually become fibrous and coarse, so burning them clears the way for fresh, new growth. If the land is not burned over, scrub and thorn trees spread rapidly. When the rainy season comes, new grass grows and may become six feet tall or more.

Early farmers in the savanna area grew yams, corn, rice, peanuts, cassava, tomatoes, shea butter, guinea corn, tobacco, and millet. Agriculture in the savanna could be precarious because rainfall varied from year to year. Cattle raising was one of the main occupations in the region. Cattle manure was often used to fertilize crops. Sheep, goats, chickens, and guinea foul were also raised. Housing in the savanna ranged from elaborate buildings of sun-dried bricks to simple, portable homes for people who traveled with their cattle.

Desert

The Sahara desert, in the north of West Africa, received 10 inches of rainfall a year or less. Sometimes there was no rain for years. When rain did come, it was usually in a storm, which ran off without penetrating the soil. Temperatures could be extreme – climbing as high as 130 degrees Fahrenheit – and July temperatures averaged 95 degrees Fahrenheit. In the middle of the night, there could be freezing temperatures in the northern Sahara. Early Africans lived wherever there was adequate water from wells. Small groups of people learned to make a living from the very limited plant and animal resources available in the desert. Trade routes across the Sahara were a major source of livelihood before ship and air trade routes were well developed in the last century.

Kathy Schick (1995) argues that the Sahara desert has not always been dry. She contends that about 10,000 years ago a period of higher rainfall lasted in the region for some time, making the area an important center for food production. During the early period the Sahara supported substantial populations in settlements around lakes, ponds, and rivers interspersed throughout plains that, although sparsely vegetated, had a Mediterranean climate and were considerably better watered than today.

Trade in West Africa

Trade was the principal stimulant for the interaction of West African societies and an important catalyst for state building. Long before the slave trade era, West Africans along the coast initiated direct contact with other parts of the world. George Brooks (1986) contends that West Africans established trade routes that linked them to markets in the Middle East, the Red Sea, and the Far East. Traders, artisans, envoys, and pilgrims were among the travelers who used these routes.

West Africa had a most highly developed trading system: coastal riverine and caravan networks, notably those developed by Mande- and Hausa-speaking groups, expedited the exchange of products from the Sahel, savannas, rain forests, deserts, and coastlands. Exchange between ecological zones and the other parts of the world involved a wide range of commodities, including iron, iron utensils, cloth, gold, grains, livestock, pots, baskets, beads, leather goods, captives, kola nuts, salt, dried fish and mollusks, and numerous other foodstuffs, condiments, and medicinal substances. Some of these commodities, notably gold and captives, were transported

across the Sahara to pay for salt mined in the Sahara, horses, prestige cloth, and other luxury goods.

The trade in West Africa was facilitated by landlord–stranger reciprocities. Hosts accorded strangers safety and security for their possessions in return for acknowledgment of their prerogatives as landlords, including the rights to levy taxes, to act as middlemen in trade, and to allocate land use. For example, where Mande blacksmiths and traders settled, they formed lodges of the "power associations." These acquired great influence among landlord groups, so much so that they were able to gain control over local rulers, mediate conflict between groups, protect trade routes from warfare and brigandage, and otherwise promote the interests of Mande traders and settlers, their families, and affiliated groups. Thus, Joseph Harris (1998) observes that long before Europeans arrived, West African societies were linked by extensive and growing trading patterns that connected areas from the Atlantic to Lake Chad and from the Gulf of Guinea to the Sahara. These trade networks testify to the viability of the social and political institutions that ensured the safe movement of travelers and merchandise.

West Africa was and still is a major region that has made significant contributions to the development of the entire continent. From the rural areas to the cities, these contributions can be directly and indirectly attributed to key aspects of West African society. Such aspects include West African institutions in which the extended family (lineage and clans) was a cornerstone for individual and communal success and survival. Another key institution was religion, which served as the foundation for all life both temporal (earthly) and eternal. The West African belief in One God, the creator of all life, was extremely prevalent. Yet there was also the belief in many lesser gods, as well as in ancestral spirits. Respect for all life, particularly animals, was also interwoven into the fabric of West African life. Early West African society also tended to embrace two major world religions – Islam and Christianity. The practices of these religions also played a significant role in educational and economic life. While Muslims established many of the early schools in West Africa, missionaries used the offering of more advanced educational opportunities and better schools as a means of converting West Africans to Christianity.

Education and power, in many instances, were inextricable in early West African society. The acquisition of knowledge was strongly encouraged, highly valued, and closely coveted. As such, it was not left up to chance but, rather, was often placed in the hands of the Poro and Sande – power associations that were dedicated to upholding traditional beliefs and practices many of which centered on the search for knowledge. Membership in the associations was highly prized and served as the key to much of a West African's life destiny.

The economics of West Africans were varied. In some regions, people changed the areas in which they worked in order to survive. As a result, the occupations of the people were mixed and changed depending on the situation. Such occupations included agriculture, fishing, blacksmithing, hunting, and horticulture. The forest and the savanna served as two primary locations for work. Even the desert was "cultivated" to produce a living from its limited plant and animal life.

To understand West Africa requires a willingness to take an in-depth look at the multiple factors that comprise life in this part of the continent. Only when examined as individual components and as parts of a larger whole can these factors combine

toward more lucid and accurate historical understandings of the region. While the historiography on West Africa is rich and growing, areas that still beckon for further study include traditional medicine and healing, women's role in West African politics, kinship network, the role of art in West Africa, and women's role in traditional religions.

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