

# Investigating History

## Grade 6, Unit 3

### Sub-Saharan Africa



**How do we best tell the stories of ancient African societies and the factors that shaped them?**

#### Framing the Unit

Unit 3, on the geography and ancient history of sub-Saharan Africa, seeks to illuminate the longevity, diversity, and interconnectedness of Africa's civilizations and societies while providing opportunities for students to connect Africa's ancient past with its present. Remarkable new research—utilizing linguistics, DNA analysis, and oral knowledge to supplement archaeology and written records—has opened new vistas into Africa's history. Scholars have established that the complex societies of pre-colonial Africa were numerous and diverse, shaped by specific interactions between humans and their environments.

The unit is organized thematically and with a regional approach. It begins with a hook lesson, engaging students with diverse and vibrant images of the continent today alongside the unit's Essential Question. The lessons that follow progress thematically to address a variety of Supporting Questions.

Cluster 1 introduces the physical and human geography of the continent, probing the theme of human and environmental interaction. Students explore diverse maps of the continent and the stories they tell, then research a country of their choice to create an informative “postcard” that answers the Supporting Question.

Cluster 2 compares and contrasts the characteristics of Africa's ancient complex societies by focusing on community structures, social roles, and the passing of knowledge through written and oral tradition. Students probe a small number of case study civilizations—one for each of four regions—and consider their modes of leadership and specialization.

Cluster 3 explores how the specialized roles of ironsmiths, farmers, and kings shaped the organization and values of ancient West African societies. Through image analysis, inquiry-based discussion, and comparison to modern essential workers, students examine how occupational roles reflect leadership, power, and social importance in complex civilizations.

Cluster 4 explores the themes of trade and cross-cultural exchange, expanding economic concepts while promoting the understanding that African communities were global and interconnected.

**Unit Overview**

Finally, Cluster 5 is a brief investigation of religious traditions in pre-colonial Africa (Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religions). The cluster highlights flexibility and adaptation, leading to a pair of lessons on African religious tolerance, past and present.

Across all clusters, the curriculum affords the opportunity for students to question ethnocentric understandings of Africa. This theme is well aligned with the literacy and practice standards featured in Unit 3, especially Practice Standards 4 and 6. By investigating sub-Saharan Africa's geography and ancient cultures through this set of lenses, students will be prepared to develop an accurate and multifaceted vision of its history.

*Prepare to teach this unit by exploring the [Background Brief: Sub-Saharan Africa](#), which was designed to help you build content knowledge through a variety of resources. The brief also highlights current perspectives and research—along with potential misconceptions and any debates you should know about—so you can present this unit with confidence.*

***Enduring Understandings***

1. Historians are revising African history by using archaeology, written texts, and oral traditions to uncover the continent's past; new research led by African scholars is providing a more accurate and complete understanding, though some details may still remain elusive due to the nature of evidence.
2. Geography shapes human communities by influencing soil, climate, and rainfall across Africa; these environmental factors created diverse challenges and opportunities, prompting African societies to develop innovative solutions and adapt to their surroundings.
3. Knowledge and traditions are preserved and adapted through oral and written forms of literacy; African societies maintained continuity through the sharing of beliefs and knowledge while also embracing new influences that enriched their art, religion, language, and culture.
4. Africa's societies are interconnected through trade and cultural exchanges with neighboring and distant regions; openness to outside influences led to advancements in various aspects of society, including art, religion, and technology, benefiting societies both within and outside the continent.
5. African societies have diverse forms of governance that reflect their unique cultures and traditions; in many societies, leadership was balanced by ethical beliefs, religious practices, and the influence of community and social groups, creating complex and interconnected political systems.

***Connections to Current Events and Issues***

Connections to today's world and students' lives are built into this unit. Other contemporary connections could be added or developed for various topics of study within this unit, and we encourage you to take advantage of opportunities to connect students' learning to contemporary local, national, and global developments that may arise as you teach this unit. Some ideas for linking this unit to current events and issues include:

- An array of new literature for middle-grade readers—memoirs, novels, graphic literature, fantasy, and more—depicts a variety of African places and stories and can help expand this curriculum. Share works that speak to the diverse regions of the continent featured in Unit 6.3. Consider a collaboration with ELA colleagues, an after-school reading club, or a reading challenge. See the Primary Source Global Literature Resource Guide (Grades 6–8) for essential titles and the Children’s Africana Book Awards website from Howard University’s Center for African Studies for the newest high-quality works each year.
- Leadership and the distribution of power and knowledge across African societies is a theme for learning in Cluster 2. For a contemporary connection, students can investigate some of the continent’s present-day peacemakers and activists who are speaking truth to power today. One place to start with is Africa’s remarkable record of Nobel Peace Prize winners, documented in 10 African Nobel Peace Prize laureates and profiles on the Nobel Prize website, such as the profile of Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian peace activist, social worker, and women’s rights advocate. Activists across the continent have been advocating for democracy reform, LGBTQ rights, environmental justice, and gender equality. The podcast series *What Teachers Need to Know—Africa Edition* (by Primary Source) can get you started with teaching tips and classroom resources for many of these movements and issues.
- Cultural and artistic movements into and out of Africa are another theme of Unit 6.3. Explore a contemporary parallel with an extension study of diasporic arts, music, and culinary traditions that circulate throughout the contemporary African Atlantic world. *Africans Outside Africa: Life in Diaspora Around the World* (Primary Source podcast) provides background knowledge as well as teaching recommendations and classroom resources. Africa and the World is a teaching module of seven classroom activities developed by the Exploring Africa project of Michigan State University’s African Studies Center. Students can create their own works in the genres and styles they learn about or curate a show of favorite works and creative artists of the Afro-diaspora, both past and present.

Vocabulary (in order of appearance)

Tier 3 Vocabulary		
sub-Saharan Africa Eurocentric griot oral tradition	scribe Arab Swahili Coast caravan	trans-Saharan trade African indigenous religions religious tolerance
Priority Tier 2 Vocabulary		
adapt reputation	trade networks export	product preserve

social status  
prestige

import  
consumer

anecdote

## Lesson Clusters

### *Cluster 1: Environment and Adaptation in Sub-Saharan Africa (Lessons 1-8)*

**What are the defining aspects of Africa's environment, and how have people adapted to its challenges while using its resources?**

*Focus Standards:* 6.T4a.1, 6.T4a.2, 6.T4a.3, PS 2, PS 4, PS 6, RCA-H.6-8.2, RCA-H.6-8.6, SLCA.6-8.1, WCA.6-8.1

Following the hook lesson, this cluster introduces students to Africa's vast size and diversity through a geographer's lens. They analyze various maps to explore representations, purposes, and perspectives (PS 4, PS 6). Next, they study Africa's ecoregions—examining latitude, climate, soil, vegetation, and rainfall—to understand how human communities have adapted to these environments.

The cluster culminates in a mini-research project, where students “visit” a modern sub-Saharan nation, creating a postcard that answers the Supporting Question while distinguishing between facts and opinions. This research builds essential skills for the Summative Assessment.

Exploring the question: *What are the defining aspects of Africa's environment, and how have people adapted to its challenges while using its resources?* students compare historical and contemporary examples of human ingenuity in navigating environmental conditions (PS 6). The cluster concludes with a Formative Assessment, requiring students to develop a claim supported by evidence.

### *Cluster 2: Ancient African Traditions, Knowledge, and Power (Lessons 9-14)*

**How do stories, artifacts, and written records help us understand the unique features of ancient African societies?**

*Focus Standards:* 6.T4a.3, 6.T4b.1, 6.T4b.2, 6.T4b.3, PS 2, PS 4, RCA-H.6-8.2, RCA-H.6-8.6, SLCA.6-8.1, WCA.6-8.1

This cluster explores the complex societies of precolonial sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting archaeological, written, and oral sources that have reshaped historical understanding. Students analyze this evidence to investigate social structures and daily life. Students will explore the Supporting Question: *How do stories, artifacts, and written records help us understand the unique features of ancient African societies?*

It begins with a lesson on Eurocentrism, followed by a chronology activity on Africa's civilizations. Students then conduct a multiday inquiry into how stories, artifacts, and

**Unit Overview**

records reveal the unique features of ancient African societies.

Shifting focus to West Africa, the cluster examines knowledge, traditions, and occupational specialization. Lessons explore oral and written literacies, the role of storytellers and scribes, and civic values.

***Cluster 3: In-Depth Inquiry: Historic Occupations and Civic Values (Lessons 15-17)***

**Which role—the ironsmith, the farmer, or the king—do you think had the greatest influence on ancient West African societies?**

*Focus Standards: 6.T4a.1, 6.T4a.2, 6.T4b.3, PS 2, PS 4, PS 6, RCA-H.6-8.2, RCA-H.6-8.6*

In an In-Depth Inquiry, students move through the stages of the inquiry cycle more independently, using sets of provided sources to investigate a question. This In-Depth Inquiry investigates the significance of occupational roles in the organization and values of ancient West African societies. Through inquiry and analysis of oral traditions, written records, and material culture, students explore how specialized roles—such as ironsmiths, farmers, and kings—contributed to the development of complex societies.

The sequence begins with an introduction to the cluster’s guiding question, where students engage in an inquiry-based exploration of occupational roles and their societal impact. They then examine oral traditions, particularly African proverbs, to uncover the civic and social values associated with leadership and power.

The inquiry deepens as students analyze historical evidence to debate which occupation—ironsmith, farmer, or king—held the most significant role in ancient West African society. By engaging in collaborative discussions and critical reasoning, students evaluate the interconnectedness of these roles and their contributions to societal stability and progress.

The cluster concludes with a synthesis lesson, where students reflect on their learning and articulate a well-supported argument regarding the most influential occupation. This final reflection reinforces their understanding of the complexities of ancient West African civilizations and the ways in which social structures were shaped by occupational specialization.

By the end of this cluster, students will address the Supporting Question—*Which role—the ironsmith, the farmer, or the king—do you think had the greatest influence on ancient West African societies?*—and develop a nuanced appreciation of the interdependence of social roles in historical contexts.

***Cluster 4: Trade and Transformation in Ancient Africa (Lessons 18-24)***

**How did Africa's geography influence local and global trade?**

*Focus Standards: 6.T4a.3, 6.T4b.1, 6.T4b.2, 6.T4b.3, 6.T4b.4, PS 2, PS 4, PS 6, RCA-H.6-8.2, RCA-H.6-8.6, SLCA.6-8.1, WCA.6-8.1*



**Unit Overview**

Trade is an economic activity with far-reaching consequences involving the exchange of language, beliefs, practices, and ideas. In the ancient and medieval periods, Africa played a central role in a vast network of trade across Eurasia, impacting Africa and beyond. In this cluster, students explore the "how and why" of African trade, focusing on its connections to places and environments as well as its broader cultural and historical effects. The central question of the cluster is: *How did Africa's geography influence local and global trade?*

The cluster begins with an overview of three major African trade networks, incorporating geographic reasoning and economic concepts. Students analyze these networks through various sources, considering the purpose and perspectives of historical evidence.

Next, students dive deeper into two key networks: the Swahili Coast trade and the West African "gold and salt" trade. The cluster concludes with a synthesis activity in which students explain how Africa's geography influenced trade, highlighting key geographic features and their effects on societies, using two pieces of evidence from the provided artifacts.

### *Cluster 5: Religion and Religious Tolerance in Ancient Africa (Lessons 25-29)*

#### **How did religious traditions develop, adapt, and interact with one another in ancient sub-Saharan Africa?**

*Focus Standards: PS 2, PS 4, PS 6, RCA-H.6-8.2, RCA-H.6-8.6, SLCA.6-8.1*

This small cluster delves into three religious traditions that are deeply embedded in the history of Africa—Islam, Christianity, and African indigenous religions. It revolves around the adaptability and openness of religious traditions in Africa as well as their continuity, which have been a strengthening feature of many of its societies. Students trace the arrival and early development of Christianity and Islam, asking how sub-Saharan African communities adapted these new religions to their own needs and contexts. Then, students step back to consider the indigenous religions that preceded Christianity and Islam in Africa.

The final lessons bring a different approach to the topic of religious interaction and adaptability, probing evidence of religious tolerance in the subcontinent with examples from ancient and contemporary African life. These lessons give students practice with PS 1 (among other standards) as religious tolerance/acceptance is a core content theme and disposition of civic understanding for young people in a democratic society. The cluster features analysis of primary and secondary textual evidence, asking students to evaluate the complexity and evolution of religion in sub-Saharan Africa.

### *Summative Assessment: Sub-Saharan Africa (Lesson 30)*

*Focus Standards: PS 2, PS 4, PS 6*

**Unit Overview**

The Summative Assessment for Unit 6.3 provides students with the opportunity to showcase the knowledge and skills they have developed throughout the unit. Students will engage in structured activities that guide them toward crafting a well-supported written response to the Unit Essential Question:

- *How do we best tell the stories of ancient African societies and the factors that shaped them?*

Students will begin with a collaborative Discussion Diamond activity, where they will generate and organize possible responses to the Essential Question using evidence from the unit. They will then individually compose a two-paragraph written argument, utilizing unit sources and explaining how those sources support their claim. By engaging in collaborative discussions and evidence-based writing, students will demonstrate their understanding of the ways in which historians can best share accurate portrayals of ancient sub-Saharan Africa.

## Unit Focus Standards

### *Content Standards*

- **6.T4a.1:** On a map of the world, locate the continent of Africa, the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea. On a map of Africa, locate the northern, eastern, western, central, and southern regions of Africa, the Sahara Desert, Mount Kilimanjaro, the Cape of Good Hope, the Great Rift Valley, Lake Victoria). Use other kinds of maps (e.g., landform, population, climate) to determine important characteristics of this region.
- **6.T4a.2:** On a political map of Sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrate map reading skills to distinguish countries, capitals, and other cities and to describe their absolute location (using latitude and longitude coordinates) and relative location (relationship to other countries, cities, or bodies of water); use knowledge of maps to complement information gained from text about a city, country or region.
- **6.T4a.3:** Explain how absolute and relative locations, major physical characteristics, climate (including drought and desertification), and natural resources in Sub-Saharan Africa have influenced settlement patterns, population size, and economies of the countries.
- **6.T4b.1:** Identify the location, sources of wealth, and importance of the Kingdom of Axum (c. 100-940 CE); explain the role it played in the adoption of Christianity in Ethiopia and the role east African societies played in the spread of Islam to South Asia.
- **6.T4b.2:** Explain the pivotal role Swahili coastal societies along the Indian Ocean played in linking trade networks between interior Africa and maritime routes along the coasts of Central and South Asia, and connecting to China; identify key goods in this trade (e.g., gold, ivory, iron, people from Africa, and cloth, glass beads, and porcelain from Asia).

**Unit Overview**

- **6.T4b.3:** Identify the locations, sources of wealth and importance of West African cities and empires, including the city of Timbuktu (beginning c.5th century CE), and the empire of ancient Ghana (beginning c. 700 CE).
- **6.T4b.4:** Explain the pivotal role these societies played in the trans-Saharan trade, the spread of Islam, and trade with North Africa, Europe, West Asia in gold, ivory, and slaves and the contributions of these societies to the modern world.

*Practice Standards*

- **PS 2:** Develop relevant guiding questions with peer support.
- **PS 4:** Compare and contrast points of view of people in the same world region across multiple sources, while clearly distinguishing opinion from fact.
- **PS 6:** Use evidence and reasoning to support a claim.

*Literacy Standards*

- **RCA-H.6-8.2:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- **RCA-H.6-8.6:** Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).
- **SLCA.6-8.1:** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on discipline-specific topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **WCA.6-8.1:** Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.



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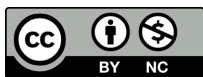
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