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THE ORIGIN OF AGRICULTURE IN AFRICA

First Farmers in the Cradle of Humanity

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Modern humans came from Africa. However, the continent started farming much later than other areas.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

AGRICULTURE: WHY WASN'T AFRICA FIRST?

Before modern humans, our ancestors evolved in Africa for millions of years. Over the past 3.5 million years, there were *Homo erectus*, *Homo habilis*, and *Australopithecus*. We *Homo sapiens* have only existed for about 200,000 to 250,000 years.

Africa is the first home of our species. About 74,000 years ago, there was a huge catastrophe on Earth. Some scientists think it was the super-eruption of the Mount Toba volcano in Indonesia. Humans were almost wiped out. There were only a few thousand left. Ten thousand years later, there was a large human migration out of Africa.

As a result, humans are a closely related family. Groups of chimpanzees living a few hundred miles apart have more diverse genes than the entire human species spread across the whole planet. Humans spent a long time in Africa. They migrated out of Africa only “recently.” Why didn’t agriculture begin to evolve there first?

In about 9000 BCE, the Fertile Crescent was the first region in the world to develop agriculture. On the other side of the world, China and New Guinea followed in 7000 BCE. For thousands of years, the only part of Africa to have agriculture was Egypt. It helped that Egypt interacted closely with Southwest Asia.



Continent of Africa.

All of Africa below the Sahara continued hunting and gathering until approximately 3000 BCE. Why did sub-Saharan Africa lag behind the Fertile Crescent by 6,000 years? Humans had been in Africa much longer: about 200,000 years. Was there some sort of disaster that wiped out earlier attempts at farming without a trace? Was there some sort of “failure” in the collective learning of

the people there? Why didn’t the first farms, the first cities, and the first empires emerge in sub-Saharan Africa: the land where our ancestors had roamed for hundreds of thousands of years?

AFRICAN “FINE-TUNING”

In fact, Africa developed agriculture a little later because it was the first home of our species. As early humans evolved on the African continent, native animals evolved alongside them.

Because they had time to adjust to humans, many of the large mammals — megafauna — in Africa still exist today. Large mammals in other places such as Australia and the Americas were wiped out when humans arrived. Still, the existence of such large mammals made it difficult for humans in Africa to domesticate many animals because they were so good at adjusting to humans. Domesticating, or taming, wild animals is a key step in farming.

It also works the opposite way. Humans evolved in Africa as foragers. In fact, earlier human species foraged for millions of years. For most of human history, foraging was the best way of life. Over many generations, humans adapted to their environment. They formed a key part of the ecosystem.

We can say that humankind was born in Africa. In other regions of the world, humans suddenly turned up. These migrants faced new environmental challenges. Over long periods of evolutionary time, humans had learned to live with Africa and Africa had learned to live with humans.

“GARDENS OF EDEN” AND THE “TRAP OF SEDENTISM”

Early farming was a difficult and inefficient life. It was one that humans tried to avoid if they could. It was usually only with a “trap of sedentism” that humans gave up foraging and started to farm. (Sedentism means settling down.)

At first, farming was a much harder life than foraging. One estimate said it took 9.5 hours a day of farming versus 6 hours of foraging to survive. Early farming led to: more disease, worse nutrition, worse health, and more vulnerability to climate and natural disasters.

We know that foraging societies in the Kalahari Desert in Southwest Africa knew about farming for a long time, but didn’t adopt it. Why would anyone adopt farming? At the time, it was less healthy and much harder than foraging.

Africa is a beautiful continent. Still, it contains many challenging environments. The north has the harsh and deadly Sahara. It's not likely to see farming there. The huge desert also cut off communication with earlier agricultural societies in Eurasia. In fact, sub-Saharan Africa had to come up with farming independently in West Africa.

The continent is also home to many dense forests and jungles. These areas would be very difficult for foragers to clear, settle, and farm. Finally, diseases also had evolved alongside humans in Africa. There were many tropical diseases that made it a good idea for humans to keep moving rather than settle down.

On other continents, early humans found so-called "Gardens of Eden." These were areas so filled with useful plants that foragers would settle there for many years. Eventually, when all the plants had been used up, the foragers would begin growing their own crops. This is the "trap of sedentism." It may have happened with the Natufians in the Fertile Crescent.

In Africa, there weren't many "Gardens of Eden." Humans roamed from region to region as foragers for hundreds of thousands of years. They entered one area, feasted on the resources, then moved on to another region. Meanwhile the land naturally replenished itself over time. Sub-Saharan Africa simply did not have many of those tempting "traps" to force humans into early farming.

THE INDEPENDENT ORIGIN OF AFRICAN AGRICULTURE

Farming did eventually emerge independently in West Africa at about 3000 BCE. It first appeared in the fertile plains on the border between present-day Nigeria and Cameroon. It is possible there finally was a "Garden of Eden" there to "trap" people into early farming. However, many scholars argue that even here, farming began as a way to feed cattle, not people.

West Africans began to domesticate wild cattle several thousand years before they started to farm. For a group on the move, the advantage of herding cattle is obvious. You can take your food source with you. If you can breed your food, you've got a renewable supply of meat. By growing a little food, you can feed your animals. Meanwhile, you can still forage for better food sources.

The first efforts to domesticate plants in West Africa started slowly. Eventually, West Africans began to settle and grow their food full-time. From 3000 BCE to 1000 BCE, the practice of farming spread across West Africa. These early farmers grew millet and sorghum. These plants were used for grain, and as fodder for cattle to eat. Later,

they began growing a special strain of rice native to Africa. They also grew tubers (root vegetables), yams, cowpeas, and oil palms. They also began growing fruits and melons.

Early West African farming methods are unique in many ways. They used crops only native to Africa. Scholars think that farming in West Africa was not copied from Egypt or the Fertile Crescent. It seems West Africa is another one of those regions that mysteriously started farming independently. In fact, West Africa started farming around the same time that farming began in the Americas. This was before it began in many other regions of the world.

THE SPREAD OF AFRICAN AGRICULTURE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Sorghum and millet were the main crops of West Africans, who still herded cattle. This played a role in a great migration of farmers out of West Africa starting at approximately 1000 BCE. These migrants were the Bantu people. They spread farming across the rest of the continent. Some of them traveled along the fertile grasslands of the Sahel, a strip of land just below the Sahara. This was a path to East Africa. The Bantu arrived around 1000 BCE, bringing their farming methods with them.

The East Africans had already domesticated a few plants. One example is enset: a kind of banana. Around this time, Africans also began to use iron. They were making useful weapons and farming tools. There were major iron production sites near Lake Chad, below the Sahara in present-day Chad, and Lake Victoria, in the lush regions of East Africa.

Meanwhile, other Bantu wandered out of West Africa and headed south. By 500 BCE,



Bunches of sorghum (bottom) and pearl millet (top right), annual grasses grown as grain in the Sahel Desert, Mali, and West Africa.

they had reached the Congo region in Central Africa. Finally, the Bantu in East Africa migrated south all the way to the tip of Africa. They arrived in Natal, the lands of the Zulu, by 500 CE. By that time, farming had spread all over the continent. Most foraging communities were absorbed by these herding/farming peoples.

Remember the Efik origin story, which you read in Unit 1. It talks about people disobeying the gods and beginning to farm. The story describes them farming in exactly the region where farming did begin. Also, the Zulu origin story speaks of a long journey south from the “reed” lands to the north. People did indeed migrate down from East Africa to the south.

The spread of agriculture across sub-Saharan Africa is reflected in the sudden jump in population around this time. West Africa remained the most populous, thanks to its early start. It remains so today. In 500 BCE, sub-Saharan Africa had an estimated population of only 7 million. It was so low because the population was mostly foragers. Foragers need a lot of land to support themselves because they stay on the move, searching for food sources. By 500 CE — just 1,000 years later — the number of people had nearly tripled to 20 million.

“LATE” AFRICAN REGIONS, C.1000 BCE-500CE

Sub-Saharan Africa enjoyed the advantages of foraging for a very long time. Even so, West Africa was one of the first regions of the world to develop agriculture. Only the Fertile Crescent and East Asia did so sooner.

It took about 2,000 years for farming to spread to the rest of Africa. Most of sub-Saharan Africa didn’t begin farming until 1000 BCE to 500 CE. This is much later than some of the other regions of the world.

It takes time after the start of agriculture in a region before agrarian civilizations can rise. It takes time to build up a population and grow enough surplus food to feed cities.

Africa’s journey into the agrarian era is a mixture of pros and cons. On one hand, some regions of Africa were at a disadvantage when they encountered European and Islamic cultures in the Common Era. On the other hand, the late start of agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa was a blessing for many people for thousands of years. They enjoyed healthier lifestyles and a higher standard of living as foragers.

Agrarian civilizations had their faults: rigid hierarchies, strict leaders, and a wide gap between rich and poor. By remaining in bands of foragers, large regions of Africa escaped these downsides for a long time. In between foraging and modern society, the

standard of living for many people got worse, it seems.

The challenge for Africa today is to fully modernize. This challenge concerns the entire world. We are increasingly connected into a single global system.

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Image of sorghum and millet bunches, annual grasses grown as grain and animal fodder, Sahel Desert, Mali, West Africa. © Ingo Arndt/Minden Pictures/Corbis.

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