AFRICA & AFRICANS

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Part I

AFRICAN BACKGROUND

MYTHS AND FACT

Africa has for centuries been seen by Europeans and North Americans through webs of myth. The myths change from time to time and place to place, depending far more on the needs and prejudices, even the ignorance, of the myth-makers than on the facts in Africa. The process of myth-making is still going full tilt, but the myths are quite different from those of only a few years ago. Understanding the reality underlying such pervasive and glib myths helps to strip them away so that we can see what is in fact there.

Africa was long known as the "Dark Continent," but the darkness was in the ignorance of the outside world, not in Africa. Europeans and Americans knew a great deal about the geography of most other parts of the world before explorers began the systematic penetration of Africa in the nineteenth century. During the colonial era—for tropical Africa, roughly 1880 to 1960—Europeans who went to govern Africa or to do business there began to learn more, and the new familiarity percolated down to the rest of the population back in Europe. British and French school children learned about great missionaries like David Livingstone or Cardinal Lavigérie, as well as military leaders like Kitchner or Archinard.

Americans were spared this familiarity with "colonial history"—the history of Europeans in Africa. Few Americans went to Africa. Until the 1950s, American diplomats went only to the few independent countries like Liberia or Ethiopia. Elsewhere the United States had only a few consulates, attached to the embassies of colonial powers in their European capitals. The State Department dealt with Africa as a minor facet of European affairs.

By the late 1950s, a change was evident. The "third world" came to include Africa as well as Asia and Latin America. African Studies programs emerged at several universities both in the United States and in Europe. The politics, economics, and history of the continent joined the study of African culture, already begun by anthropologists. In North American universities before the mid-1950s, African history was taught only as a part of "Negro history" in a few predominantly Black colleges. By the mid-1980s, it was a recognized part of historical knowledge. African art and culture are prominent in American museums, most recently the brilliant Museum of African Art associated with the Smithsonian

in Washington. The continuing importance of the African heritage in shaping American popular music from jazz to rock came to be generally recognized. With the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the independence of most of tropical Africa, Afro-Americans began to be interested in their African heritage. Hundreds of them went to Africa as tourists to see for themselves the land of their ancestors.

In spite of the more systematic search for knowledge about Africa, the old myths lived on and new myths were added. Part of the problem comes from the way the news media report African affairs. From the American perspective, the important foreign news comes from Western Europe and Japan, from China and Russia, with only an occasional crisis drawing concern to other areas. The Viet Nam War brought Southeast Asia into the news in the 1960s; both Central America and the Middle East got media coverage in the early 1980s; the festering struggle over apartheid in South Africa from the mid-1970s onward, and pictures of starvation in Somalia in the early 1990s, assailed us. The rest of Africa, however, makes the news only when some especially troublesome event draws attention—most often negative attention—to it.

Over the past thirty years, ordinary newspaper readers and TV viewers would have been conscious of the Congo crisis beginning in 1960, which led to the creation of an independent Zaire. They would have read about the military coups and the general failure of newly independent African states. In the 1970s, tyrants like Idi Amin in Uganda or "Emperor" Jean Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Empire got more space and air time than the spectacular but peaceful economic progress and comparative freedom of Ivory Coast or Cameroon.

Natural disasters like the great drought in the sahel, which stretches across Africa from Senegal to the Sudan and Ethiopia, were publicized—in 1973 alone, more than a hundred thousand people died of starvation and disease brought on by malnutrition. A decade later, drought returned—this time to Ethiopia, the Sudan, and south as far as Zimbabwe and South Africa. Worldwide television showed dramatic starvation in Ethiopia. The disaster itself attracted some press and TV coverage, but internationally-famous rock stars attracted far more attention with concerts to raise money for the victims.

Exposure to such spectacular events did nothing to erase many of the old myths. In the popular mind, Africa is still associated with lions, and lions with jungles. In fact, lions don't live in the rain forest, but in open grasslands. Only about 5 percent of the African landmass can be classified as "jungle," if jungle means rain forest—

and for centuries, Africans have been clearing undergrowth in the rain forest to cultivate crops. Destruction of the remaining rain forest is one of the most pressing threats to the environment.

Animals of the open savanna of Kenya and Tanzania, which have attracted tens of thousands of tourists, appear weekly in TV nature series and, from time to time, in spectacular films like *Out of Africa*. Neither the nature films nor Karen Blixen's picture of settler life in Kenya are inaccurate. They tell what they want to tell very well. But, because they tell next to nothing about the life of ordinary Africans, about all they achieve is reinforcing the view of Africa as the place on earth with the most wild animals. The North American public now knows a lot about those animals. Yet none of that knowledge dispels an older and more deeply ingrained myth of Africa as a savage continent. An accurate picture of animal life high on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro coexists easily with the cartoon image of the missionary in the cannibal stew pot.

That myth of savage Africa has been part of Western thought since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even in those days, it was created out of philosophical necessity, not out of observations. The European view was that "we," the Europeans, had the one true religion and the one true civilization in the world. If that is the case, then someone else, somewhere, must represent the other extreme—the non-civilized extreme. Such philosophically necessary "savagery" could, of course, be located anywhere Europeans knew little about. Africa was a favorite place.

The opposition of savagery and civilization got confused with other oppositions: bad and good, depravity and virtue. Europe had long had a vision not only of the "achievements" of civilization but of the accompanying idea that civilization also brought with it perils of the soul that had been unknown in earlier times and "simpler" places. The confusion is mapped in the diagram below.

A Model of Confusion

	Savagery	Civilization
Good	The Noble Savage	Achievements of Civilization
Bad	The Depraved Savage	Civilization and its Discontents

The savagery that Europeans imagined at the opposite pole from themselves could be seen as either good or evil, in large part in terms of the distinction they made between the good and evil of their own position. Just as Europeans needed a distant, bad example, however imaginary, as a measure of their own attainments, so they needed a good example to measure their own shortcomings. The image of unenlightened people who nevertheless had a natural nobility served both purposes. The noble savage myth took several different forms. As the Europeans struggled with the problems of a complex and increasingly technical society, they found it useful to imagine people who were free to practice the simple virtues born of innocence. They postulated (with little or no evidence) people closer to nature, free of the incessant struggle for power and domination that marked European class and international relations. The Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity were said to come easily to such people.

Depending on which need was greatest, Europeans could invoke whichever part of the image best suited their purposes. They could postulate people with only the most rudimentary technical knowledge—without fire, virtually without language, practicing unspeakable cruelties on one another—although none of this picture had ever been true. European familiarity with cannibalism came from the Caribbean and the South Pacific, not from Africa. Non-agricultural hunting and gathering societies were very few in Africa, even before Columbus—they were far more common in the Americas and in Australasia.

The myth of savage Africa was further distorted when Europeans traded in African slaves. Most of the slaves shipped to European dominated plantations in the Americas were Africans. The need to justify the trade as compatible with Christian morality reinforced the savage myth. After all, the myth said, taking people out of such savagery was a step up for them, even if that step took them and their descendants into a life of slavery.

Later on, as the slave trade began to taper off and Christian missionaries appeared in Africa, the value of the myth of savagery changed its focus, but not its content. The more "savage" the place they worked, the greater the missionaries' mundane as well as supermundane rewards. Many of these missionaries were levelheaded observers who did not depict a savage Africa. Yet they cast before them the image of heroes doing battle with cannibalism, lust, and depravity—the forces of "darkness." Their undeniable fortitude, and the hardships they bore, were translated into the imagery of "savagery" by home congregations and missionary societies.

The myth of a savage Africa lives on today in the same way that racism in the United States lives on despite the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. Like racism, the savagery myth takes subtle forms. For example, the news media report African affairs using terms like "tribe" and "tribalism"—the only other place they do that is Native American affairs. The term "tribe," in European writing about Africa, became common only in the nineteenth century. In the era of the slave trade, Europeans usually talked about different African "nations" (although that word, too, meant something different at that time than it means today).

The confusion mapped in the diagram also shows up in the opposite myth: the "noble savage" had no more empirical basis in reality than did the myth of the depraved savage. Various forms of this image turn up in Western literature about Africa and Africans. Slaves like Eliza and Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* showed natural innocence and Christian virtues, as contrasted with the moral failings of the drivers and planters (who supposedly had the benefit of the full Christian message, yet failed to measure up to its demands).

A similar myth is still alive—only a few years ago, Alex Haley's *Roots* portrayed an eighteenth century African society on the banks of the Gambia River as innocent of the evils of the slave trade. The people (the myth goes) went about unarmed, while European slavers filled their ships by kidnapping. In fact, the Gambians not only bought and sold slaves, they were heavily armed. The Gambia River had been an artery of the slave trade for more than three hundred years. In the eighteenth century, the hometown of Haley's hero, Kunta Kinte (the presentday rural village of Jufure) was a thriving center of that trade. The Kinte family have been traders by tradition and were no doubt involved in the slave trade themselves. One can only guess that Haley used the innocence of the Africans as a literary device to highlight the crimes of the European slavery and planters, much as Harriet Beecher Stowe had done more than a century earlier.

Only a few years after *Roots* appeared as a television spectacular, a similar picture of innocence with more obvious political intent appeared in the South African movie, *The Gods Must be Crazy*. There, the San people of the Kalahari (whom the movie called Bushmen, though the word has fallen out of anthropological use) were shown leading an innocent and good life, in tune with nature, so far removed from any understanding of the modern world that they could not even recognize a Coca-Cola bottle. The implication was clear: such people could not face the modern world on their own, and were hence better off under the benevolent guidance of an apartheid regime.

Both versions of the myth of a savage Africa neglect one important fundamental fact. European and African culture and social organization have a great deal in common, developed over a very long run of history. They have more in common, for example, than either does with the cultures of eastern Asia or native North Americans or Australians. Agricultural techniques and traditions belong to a single cultural sphere. Market organization was similar. Religions were variations on the same basic themes. Family organization reflects pretty much the same values, even though Africans tended to be polygynous and Europeans claimed to be monogamous. The same kind of similarities are not found among the Chinese or the Aztecs. Europeans and Africans share a common set of diseases and immunities to disease that Native Americans and the peoples of the Pacific did not share. This deep similarity was to become one of the fundamental reasons the Americas today are occupied by descendants of Africans and of Europeans.

Among all the other myths, one of the most generalized and difficult to tear away hovers around the matter of race. Americans, both black and white, live in a society that is extremely conscious of race. Yet Europe too was a racist society from the nineteenth century onward. Europe is now increasingly troubled by racial conflict that grows out of the great immigration from overseas after the 1950s. There, as in North America, color and physical appearance far too often carry social implications.

The cultures and the histories of sub-Saharan African societies have much in common. Many commentators in the past have associated this common experience with common race. Yet all sub-Saharan Africans do not belong to a single race—not even if comparatively recent arrivals like the European-derived minorities of Zimbabwe and South Africa are left out.

The problem of race and Africa is not an African problem. Africans note racial differences, but Europeans and Americans are hung up on what they call "race." No scientifically viable measures exist for defining a similar group of people as a "race." For geneticists, the word "race" means an interbreeding population with distinct and heritable characteristics. In ordinary usage, the characteristics are not genetic but are a cultural classification of visible, physical appearance. There is no scientific reason for "counting" the shape of a person's nose and not his or her haemoglobin characteristics or proclivity for heart disease as "racial" characteristics. As an everyday badge of racial identification, North Americans recognize as "Black," "Negro," or "African-American" anyone with any

degree of African descent, measured by skin color, facial configuration, hair texture, and so on. In Liberia, "white" is measured in exactly opposite terms. A person can be "Black" in the United States and "White" in Liberia. Obviously, definitions of race can only be cultural. Geneticists estimate that about 25 percent of the gene pool circulating within the African-American community is European, predominantly from the British Isles. This means that more of the ancestors of the "typical" African-American come from Britain and Ireland than come from any one particular region of Africa.

African assessment of race is as socially conditioned as is American assessment. In the past, before anthropology was able to separate race, language, and culture and to demonstrate that the three may be connected by history, but never by genes, Westerners postulated that cultural characteristics like language were heritable. When Africans think about race, they too tend to include a lot of learned characteristics. Even the most stereotypically African-appearing of African-Americans cannot easily "pass" for African in West Africa. Africans will almost universally classify them as "European," from the way they walk, talk, and carry themselves.

Africans tend to see quite a different set of physical traits from Americans and Europeans when they examine "racial" differences. There are, within Africa, physical differences that Europeans and Americans are not conscious of. Sometimes this recognition is no more significant than the ability to guess a stranger's nationality—whether Swede or Italian, Pole or Spaniard. In other instances, recognizable physical appearance marks ancient social divisions between superiors and inferiors. Rwanda and Burundi in central Africa have a common, Bantu language and a common culture, but the physical difference between the Tutsi, the former masters, and the Hutu, the former subordinates, is usually clear even to outsiders. On the Kenya coast, nearly everyone is conscious of the physical differences among the socially dominant Afro-Arabs, the descendants of former slaves from the region of Malawi, and the up-country Kikuyu and Luo who now hold many government posts—to say nothing of the Wazungu, or European tourists, whose spending helps to support the economy. Differences in physical type also go along with important social distinctions in Ethiopia.

The point is that the racial myth—the belief that physical type is a guide to inherent ability or cultural characteristics—is completely exploded. What remains is the fact that physical appearance serves to demarcate certain social groupings. It is something like the various accents in Great Britain: English people use accent to rank others—distinctions that are totally lost on most Americans.

In North America, the African cultural heritage and African racial heritage have mixed in a very complex way. We tend to think of the United States as settled mainly by Europeans, which is true; however, our common myth fails to distinguish the timing of the European arrival. The median date for the arrival of America's African ancestors—the date by which half had arrived and half were still to come—is remarkably early, about 1780. The similar median date for the arrival of our European ancestors was remarkably late—about the 1890s. It was not until the 1840s that more Europeans than Africans crossed the Atlantic each year.

This early arrival of our African ancestors had important cultural consequences. Anthropologists used to write about the survival of "Africanisms" in African-American culture. They sometimes failed to point out that cultural Africanisms were not a part of physical inheritance. They were brought by the African immigrants through the slave trade and remained strongest within the African-American community, although many became part of American culture at large, first in the South and then in the rest of the country. African-American cooking, for example, has many traits from Africa; but gumbos with their African-derived okra are now part of a much broader tradition of "Southern" cooking, partly traceable to Africa, partly not. African music made an enormous formative contribution to jazz and its successors in American popular music, which has done much to set the tone of popular music throughout the world. Just as African-Americans share a racial inheritance from the British Isles with Euro-Americans, all Americans share a cultural inheritance from Africa.

One of the most difficult and persistent sources of myth about Africa comes from a blind spot in American thinking about the rest of the world, caused in part by the long-term rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union that dominated world international relations for forty-five years after World War II. American political leaders tended to see Africa as a group of small countries that could help or hinder the rivalry with the Soviets. The polarization made both the Americans and the Soviets see African nations either "with us" or "against us." Africans never did see the world that way—they were never much concerned with big-power rivalries. Rather, they have been and are *for* Africa, sometimes defined as their own country, or even for some smaller group within it. They were thus "for" anybody who was "for Africa" defined that way. They were against anybody who was "against Africa."

Western courting of African countries to keep them out of the clutches of "the Communists" rose and fell with changing administrations in Washington. The Reagan years were peculiarly blind to the fact that regimes labelled "Marxist" were not automatically captives of the Soviet Union. Nor were regimes that found it to their interest to support the United States, like Mobutu's Zaire, genuine friends of democracy as we understand it. Many African governments "changed sides." Egypt switched from Russia to American support in 1972, Ethiopia changed from American to Soviet support in 1974, and Somalia changed from Soviet to American support in 1975.

Several African governments have adopted names like the People's Republic of Benin or the People's Republic of the Congo, but that never did mean that they had "gone Communist" in the sense of modelling their institutions on those of the Soviet Union or joining the Warsaw Pact. Neither had those who claimed to be friends of the United States "gone Western" in the sense of instituting Western-style democracy.

In the years since the demise of the Soviet Union, the images of Africa that have appeared on our television screens have been of starving Ethiopian, Sudanese, and Somali children, and of "warlords" and "clan fighting." We have seen crowds of demonstrating South Africans mowed down by gunfire. Yet, during the same period, forward-looking African business people have been profiled in *Forbes* magazine. The task still remains: to look at Africa whole, without the myths and without the images built on our own ethnocentrism.

One last point must be made clearly, although it is easier to do today than it was a few years ago. The West does not so much have an African problem as Africa has a European problem. The white South Africans talk about a "native problem," but it is they who are the troublesome minority in that African country. Elsewhere European settlers have tended to make the best of African rule, and few African governments have been more than temporarily anti-European.

Well before the period of colonial conquests, the West began extending its cultural influence into the rest of the world. Christianity was and is an expanding, proselytizing religion. Perhaps more important, nearly simultaneously with its overseas conquests, the West discovered the power of industrial technology, which made it possible for people to produce and consume material goods on a scale completely unprecedented in the world's earlier history. The rest of the world, including Africa, wants to have control of this technology for its own purposes. Once they see how

rich others have become, they are no longer content to be poor. Even if they are better off than they were before the colonial era, the contrast between their relative poverty and the wealth elsewhere makes them deprived.

Lives of tremendous dignity and valued rewards can be lived without the trappings of Western civilization. However, once the technological possibilities are known, a new day has arrived. The relative deprivation in Africa is not simply in contrast to Europe, North America, and Japan; Africans are also conscious of what has happened in recently industrializing countries like Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. They see other peoples becoming comparatively rich without becoming completely Westernized. Africans do not want to become European or American in their culture; they want to keep what they value in their old way of life.

Our task in this book is to present briefly and as accurately as we can the facts about African society past and present. We know that we must, necessarily, be affected by the needs and myths of our own times—but we also hope to be among the first to correct whatever distortions appear as time passes, as more research is done, and as we all live longer and learn more.

THE AFRICAN CONTINEN

To understand Africa, you have to understand its ecological environment, its history, something of African achievements and aspirations, and the cultural values and outlook with which Africans view the world.

Africa is immense. It is fifty-two hundred miles from Tangiers in North Africa to Capetown in the far south—approximately the same distance as from Panama City to Anchorage, Alaska. It is forty-six hundred miles from Dakar in the far west of Africa to Cape Guardafui, the easternmost point of the African horn—only sixty-five miles less than the airline distance from New York to Moscow. Africa is a big place—three times the size of the contiguous forty-eight states of the United States.

The African continent is a vast plateau of ancient hard rock. Only 10 percent of its land area lies at less than five hundred feet above sea level, compared to 54 percent for Europe and 25 percent for North America. It has been a land area since Pre-Cambrian times—more than five hundred million years. The entire continent has been raised and lowered at various times in geological history, but only in the extreme north and south has there been any building up of great folded mountains like the Rockies or the Caucasus. The main form of land movement has been the faulting that produced the Red Sea and the Great Rift Valley that is now filled by Africa's Great Lakes.

The Arabian peninsula can be seen as a part of the African continent—the Rift Valley that cuts through it beginning in northern Turkey stretches through the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea. It then follows down the length of the Red Sea (which can be thought of as an inland lake with a small opening into the Indian Ocean) and down through Lake Rudolf. Then, at the south of Lake Rudolf, the rift divides and spreads out around Lake Victoria. However, it joins again at the head of Lake Nyasa, runs down the Shire and Zambezi rivers, and finally out to sea, where it continues as a valley in the ocean floor. It extends through more than seventy degrees of latitude—almost one-fifth of the way around the world—and contains some of the deepest lakes on earth.

The rivers and the basins of Africa are prominent. The vast basins of the Niger, the Nile, the Volta, the Zambezi, and the Congo empty into the sea, but those surrounding Lake Chad and the wastes of

Figure 2. Africa, with the United States superimposed.

the Kalahari have no such outlets. Most African rivers fall off, in steep escarpments, to the narrow coastal plain that surrounds the entire continent. Only the Niger-Benue and Zambezi-Shire do not plunge in falls and rapids over the scarps, making effective navigation from the sea impossible.

Climates and Vegetation

If we oversimplify, Africa can be divided into five major physical and vegetational zones. The north and south ends of the continent,

occupying only a small portion of its surface, enjoy Mediterranean-type climates and vegetations, much like central California. Coming inland, vast desiccated deserts and arid plains appear. Still closer to the equator are wide savanna regions, covered with tall grass and widely spaced trees. Along the equator lie humid and forested lands. Finally, highland areas throughout the continent respond to natural forces that override the climatic effects of latitude and of rainfall.

The humid forested lands straddle the equator in the Congo Basin and appear again in the coastal areas of western Africa that have the highest rainfall. Many of the most densely wooded areas take the form of gallery forests along streams and, at certain altitudes, surrounding the high hills. The forests vary from dark tropical rain forest to wooded areas so open that they can be distinguished from savanna only by scientific criteria.

North and south of the humid zone lies the savanna, which occupies by far the greatest number of square miles of Africa's surface. Savanna landscape is typically made up of rolling stretches of tall grasses, with intermittent bush and scattered trees. The inland valleys are broad, with gently sloping sides. Only where the streams rush over the scarps from the highland areas is that pattern broken.

Going still farther from the equator in both directions, the dry lands of Africa are encountered. In the south is the Kalahari Desert, and in the north, the Sahara. Some of the semi-arid African regions, where the desert and the savanna blend into one another, are reminiscent of the American Southwest. The deserts themselves—the center of the Kalahari and the several vast dry centers of the Sahara—are comparable to conditions found in Death Valley of North America.

Cities such as Algiers and Cape Town enjoy a climate much like that of southern France. The crops and cultures, where they have been subjected to European influence in these areas, are much the same: livestock, grain, and grapes.

The climatic areas of Africa might be seen as parallel belts stretching from east to west, a mirror image on either side of the equator, were it not for the fact that the pattern is seriously upset in the eastern part of the continent (and a few other parts) by highland areas in which altitude overrides latitude. The highland areas of Africa are divided between steeply mountainous terrain like that found in Cameroon and the Ruwenzori and the high, rolling plateaus such as are found in Ethiopia and Kenya. Here the climate may be cool and temperate; Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Ruwenzori bear permanent ice fields on their caps. Vegetation varies from humid

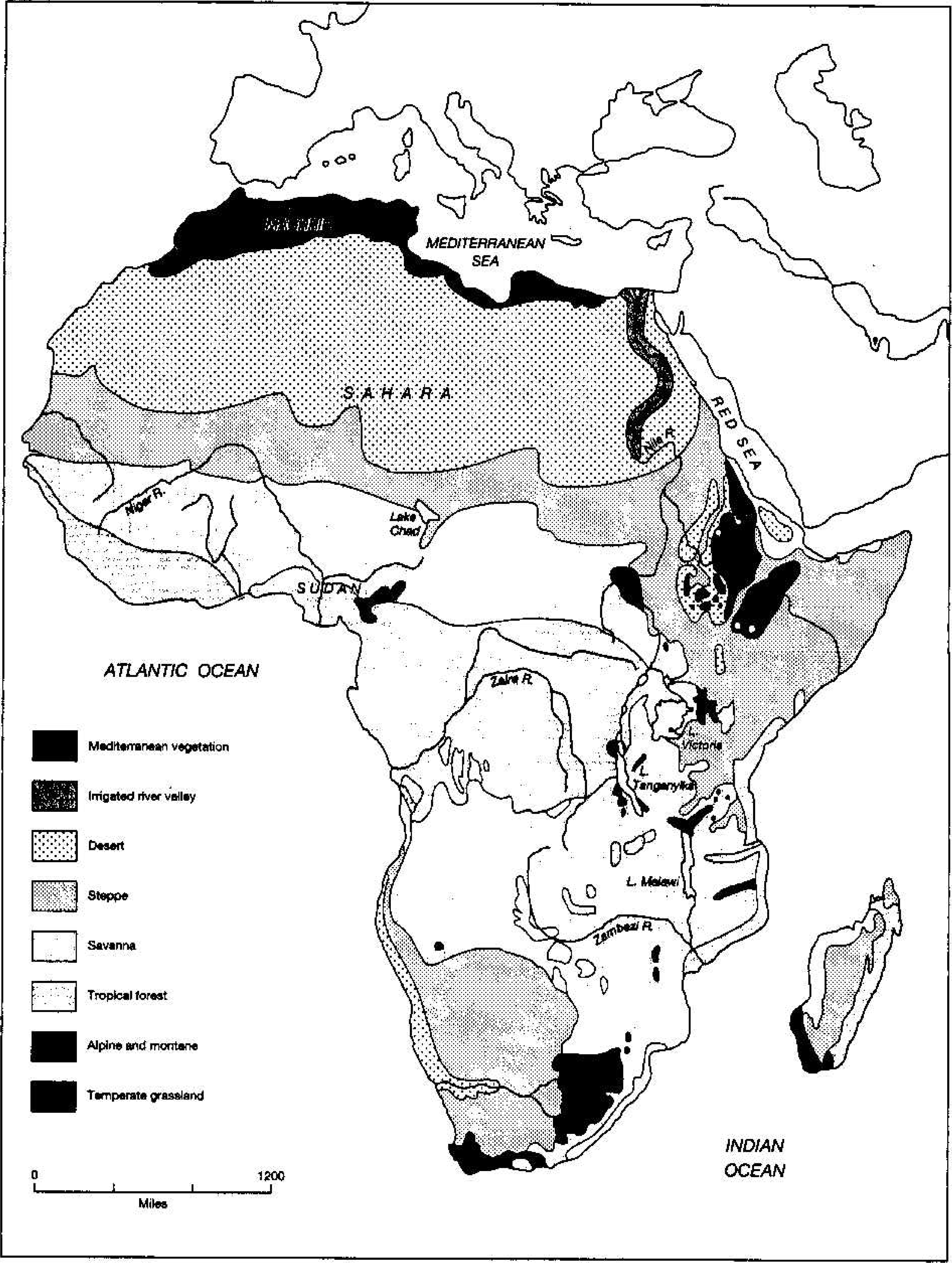

Figure 3. Vegetation zones.

forest or savanna at the foothills to Alpine mountains and tundra adjoining barren glaciers.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the African landscape is that, once the scarp is climbed, few impassable barriers are present. The climates of eastern Africa are complicated by the monsoon winds coming in from the Indian Ocean, as well as by the high altitude. Along parts of the west coast, the pattern is disturbed by winds created by the currents of the South Atlantic and the drought of the Sahara.

The climate therefore depends primarily on winds, the position of the sun, and altitude, more or less modified by the changes wrought by human beings. Because the barriers of terrain are neither sudden nor insurmountable, the weather can "follow the sun." When the sun is far north in June, July, and August, it brings rain to the lands that lie between ten degrees and twenty degrees north of the equator. Similarly, during November, December, and January, rains come to the areas between ten degrees and twenty degrees south. Each enjoys a long dry season during the wet season of the other. In the humid forested lands, rain is often well distributed throughout the year, although short dry seasons may occur, depending primarily on the winds. As a general rule, rainfall throughout the continent tends to be heaviest when the sun is overhead.

The actual amount of rain is less important than its distribution through the year. Agriculture is possible only during the rainy months. The savanna zones get from five to twenty-five inches per year, but high temperatures and pronounced dry seasons lead to rapid evaporation and hence limit the types of agricultural activity that can be pursued. The most typical savanna trees are those that are drought-resistant, such as the acacia or the locust bean. On the other hand, the areas of heaviest rainfall along the equator have broad-leafed evergreen trees. As one goes away from the equator in either direction, or as one gains altitude, evergreens give way to deciduous varieties. Along the equator, there is little range of variation in temperature from one season to the next; temperatures drop only a few degrees at night. Rainfall may go to over one hundred inches.

The dry lands may receive less than five inches of rain a year, and sometimes the heart of the desert areas may go for years with no rainfall at all. When rain does fall, it may come in torrents that dump several inches within a few hours, creating floods and erosion that give way again almost immediately to desiccation. This high variability in annual rainfall causes Africa's periodic droughts. In some regions, rainfall will vary 20–40 percent from the mean in

any year. A belt of highly variable rainfall covers the Sahara; south of the Sahara, a similar region of variable rainfall runs along the west coast from the Congo mouth southward, and inland far enough to include most of Angola and Namibia. The belt of savanna country reaches from Senegal on the west through to southern Somalia on the east, including all of Ethiopia.

Soils and Agriculture

Most African soils are typical tropical soils with little humus. Humus is the vegetable mold in the soil that results from slow decomposition of organic matter. In the so-called temperate zone there are at least some months during the year in which the oxidization of vegetable matter is slowed to a near standstill—winters enrich the soil not merely by the aeration that results from alternate freezing and thawing, but also from the fact that humus can decompose at a rapid rate only for half the year. The soil thus remains enriched. In tropical climates, humus oxidization goes on the year round, which means that much of the fertility that might be used by plants is wasted. Tropical soils have a humus content of 1.8 percent of total volume, or less. The humus content of soils in upper New York State or in Ohio runs from 10–12 percent, and in the richest Iowa farmland, as high as 16 percent. African soils are indeed poor.

Tropical soils are also easily leached. That is, the nutrients and minerals are washed out of them and flow away, either into the subsoil or into the sea. The lack of humus content and the ease of leaching interact with one another to ensure that thin tropical soils never achieve the richness of the soils of the temperate zones. The only exceptions in Africa are to be found in the Nile and Zambezi valleys and a few other areas in which there is a permanent, rich, alluvially deposited soil, maintained by seasonal flooding.

Since poor soils are easily exhausted, they can be worked only for short periods unless expensive and tedious steps are taken to maintain them. Few tropical peoples have ever had the technology or the knowledge to take the required steps. Rather, they have mined the soil of its nutrients by a method of farming known as "shifting cultivation."

Shifting cultivation is a method of farming in which land is cleared, either of the forest or of the grass that grows on it, and farmed without artificial fertilization. When the natural fertility of the plot has been exhausted, the farmer clears another patch and repeats the process, while the first patch is allowed to revert to

fallow, and ultimately to regain fertility by natural means. The entire process may take as few as five or as many as thirty years. Some authorities (and some African farmers) claim that never again is the land as good as the first time it is cleared. This method of dry farming is widespread in the tropical world: in the Philippines and Southeast Asia, in much of India, and in tropical America. In Africa, farmers in some areas remove grass or tree limbs, burn them, and use the ash as fertilizer. In parts of central Africa, notably in Zambia and the surrounding areas, branches are cut off the large trees, burned, and corn planted directly in the ash beds.

Seen from the standpoint of modern technology and the needs of the modern world, shifting cultivation is a wasteful method of farming. Agricultural experts of the world, including tropical Africa, are working to improve the system. However, the method does provide short-term security. Africans are willing to make changes, but they must first be convinced that the changes are actually for the better—that greater plenty and fuller security will result. Mere introduction of the plow, for example, is not sufficient: deeply plowed land leaches faster than land which is merely scratched on the surface, and the oxidization of humus is speeded up by aeration. Fertilizer is expensive; green manure crops require as much labor as do crops from which a more immediately apparent return is reaped. Compost requires new and improved means of cartage in a continent still accustomed to head-loading. Moreover, the new cartage would require more, and different, animals, differently used, which in turn would require new types of roads and paths, not to mention control of animal diseases. Changing the pattern of African agriculture is a monumental task.

Some peoples in the African savannas—most of them are nomadic or transhumant—are primarily dependent on their herds. Nomads do not merely wander, but rather proceed in more or less fixed patterns of routes that may take several years to complete. If the cycle of movement is one required by the seasons and is repeated in an annual cycle, it is called transhumance. Mixed farming and herding is found; in other places herders and farmers cooperate to the point of mutual dependence. Herding is restricted to the savannas and some of the highlands. Only goats can be kept in the humid forests, where in a few places even goats cannot thrive. Goats and donkeys can live in any parts of the desert that will support human populations, although a few of the human populations do not keep them. Chickens are ubiquitous among the settled peoples, many of whom also keep ducks and pigeons.

In the past the major hazard for livestock has been endemic sleeping sickness. The problem has not been fully solved, although

more research and effort have been expended on controlling sleeping sickness than on any other single health factor.

In Africa, as everywhere else, resources must be available in two senses: they must be physically present, and they must be culturally valued and used. This cultural availability may change rapidly.

In the decades just after World War II, much of the tropical world passed through what was called a "green revolution"—agricultural production rose rapidly even in the face of rapidly rising populations. In India and Latin America, such gains were made possible by new fertilizers, new varieties of seed, and new knowledge of tropical agricultural techniques. However, the green revolution bypassed Africa. The African environment is not well suited to the technology that created the green revolution. New seed varieties were tried, but it often turned out that the African seeds and techniques were already the best available for their peculiarly bad conditions.

In all the so-called "developing world," sub-Saharan Africa is the only major region where per-capita income and per-capita food production declined after about 1960. One important factor is the rapidly rising African population. When one of us studied the Tiv of central Nigeria in 1949–53, they numbered about 800,000. Today there are three and a half million of them. The current growth rate is estimated at about 3.2 percent per year for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, and as high as 4 percent in countries like Kenya. Though total agricultural production has increased, it has not increased as fast as the population. Because many countries rely on agricultural exports like coffee and cocoa as a source of revenue, less food for local use can be grown. It has been estimated that per-capita food production in 1982 was 11 percent less than it had been in 1969. After the serious drought of 1983–84, it was down 16 percent.

Another factor is that many people who had worked the land moved into the cities where they were often unemployed or underemployed. At independence, around 90 percent of the population was rural; by the mid-1980s, only an estimated 77 percent still lived in rural areas, and only 71 percent was involved in agriculture.

In spite of the sad record before and into the early 1980s, some improvements began to show a more hopeful future after the drought years. When African countries became alarmed about declining food production, they took steps to make sure that the price structure was not rigged against the farmer. The government of Rhodesia under white rule had given favorable treatment to white farmers. After Rhodesia became the independent Zimbabwe under African control in 1980, the government set out to help the black

farmers as well. By 1985 they had more than doubled their yield per acre in maize, and produced three times as much maize as they had done in 1978.

Minerals

Mineral resources other than gold were not much used by African societies before the beginning of the Christian era. Beginning about the twelfth century, perhaps even earlier, gold from sub-Saharan Africa began to reach the outer world in three separate streams. Gold from West Africa was carried across the Sahara by camel caravan to be minted in Morocco into coins that circulated throughout the Muslim world and even in Europe. A second stream moved overland from Ethiopian highlands to Egypt. The third, from placer gold diggings in Zimbabwe, was exported overland to the east coast and then north by sea in the hands of Muslim shippers mainly from Arabia, who sold most of it to India, though some reached the Muslim world as well. We cannot be precise about the size of these streams. However, the Zimbabwe and Ethiopian sources each exported on the order of five hundred kilograms in a good year. The West African supply was somewhat larger, perhaps fifteen hundred kilograms a year. The total may have been as high as 2.5 metric tons in a good year, though probably closer to 1 to 1.5 metric tons as an annual average. For the time, that was an enormous quantity of gold. It had a significant influence on monetary systems from India to Gibraltar.

Then in the 1880s, Europeans discovered gold on the Witwatersrand in South Africa. It lay in comparatively small, vertical deposits of low-quality ore, but in enormous quantities. If it had been discovered earlier, neither Africans nor Europeans would have had the technology to work it, but in the 1890s the machinery was available. South Africa rapidly became the most important source of gold anywhere. In the mid-1980s, South Africa alone produced more than 70 percent of the world's gold; additional supplies came from Zimbabwe, Zaire, and Ghana, among others.

Other metals had an early importance in long-distance trade. Copper mining began in central Africa in the second or third century of our era. By the time Vasco da Gama visited the East African coast in 1498, copper objects from either Zaire or Zambia were available for sale there. In West Africa, the copper trade was even more important, since West Africa lacked its own supplies. The trans-Saharan trade before A.D. 1500 included large copper shipments, mostly from North African or Saharan mines, but some from as far

away as central Europe. The famous bronze statues of Ife in Nigeria were produced at this time out of copper from the Sahara or from Europe combined with tin from northern Nigeria.

As with gold, the quantities of copper mined increased enormously with the coming of the Europeans and their machines for digging deep mines and working the ore. By the mid-1980s, Zambia, Zaire, and South Africa together supplied about 17 percent of the world's copper.

Africa is almost a solid chunk of iron ore—most of it low-grade, though in some areas of Liberia and Guinea-Conakry, the content runs as high as 84 percent. The early mining technique in the Nimba Mountains on the Guinea-Liberian border was merely to cut down the trees, let the thin topsoil wash away, and use surface mining methods on the naked, rusting hills. In the mid-1980s, however, Africa accounted for only about 9 percent of world iron-ore production, mostly from South Africa, followed by Liberia and Mauritania.

Iron was forged in many parts of pre-colonial Africa. The southern fringes of the Sahara are littered with the remains of earthen furnaces which could turn out either wrought-iron or steel. In a few places in West Africa, smiths still make their own iron using the old methods, though today they are likely to recycle truck springs to make tools in the traditional shapes. Most iron used today is a product either of Africa's new iron industry or is imported from Korea or Japan.

Diamonds are one of the continent's most important assets. In the mid-1980s, Africa accounted for more than 80 percent of world diamond production, both industrial and gem stones.

All of these minerals—the gold, diamonds, iron, and copper—were explored and set into production before the colonial period ended. Oil, however, was new in the post-colonial era. Especially during the period of very high oil prices, from 1974 to the early 1980s, oil had an enormous influence on African development. Those countries that had large supplies readily available, like Nigeria, passed through an economic boom followed by a bust. Countries that had no oil found their economic development sharply curtailed by the rising cost of energy that was essential for transportation, industry, and modern agriculture. The extent of Africa's potential wealth in oil is still uncertain. By the mid-1980s, Africa produced about 4 percent of world crude oil, much of it from the off-shore continental shelf of the Gulf of Guinea in southern Nigeria, Gabon, and Angola.

Since the Second World War, many minor minerals from Africa have also increased in importance. These include mica, quartz,

tungsten, bauxite, uranium, chrome, tantalite, columbite, cobalt, zinc, and manganese.

Africa's main economic claim to world attention has been minerals. That situation will probably continue for some time to come.

Diseases

Africa was long called "the white man's grave," and with reason. Strangers arriving on the tropical coasts once died at rates as high as 50 percent in the first year of residence because they lacked immunities to tropical diseases. People of African ancestry born in and raised in North America or the West Indies died at the same high rates if they came to Africa as adults.

Lowland, tropical Africa may well have the most intractable disease environment in the world. Over the past century or so, the struggle of modern medicine to deal with that environment shows some victories and some defeats. One victory during the early decades after the Second World War was won over yaws, which is, in its primary phase, a skin disease of the wet tropics (tertiary yaws affects the bone). It is a close relative of syphilis, but it is spread by skin contact rather than sexual transmission, and it was one of the world's most prevalent diseases before 1949, when the World Health Organization began a campaign of mass treatment with penicillin. The anti-yaws campaign was dramatically effective in the 1950s, and the disease nearly disappeared in some places. Continued surveillance was necessary to sustain the victory, however, and yaws began a revival in some parts of West Africa in the 1970s, in much the same way tuberculosis revived in the United States in the 1990s. The most notable victory, however, was the eradication of smallpox. In 1980, the World Health Organization announced that smallpox had disappeared worldwide, the last cases being in eastern Africa.

Another notable victory came in the early 1980s, when teams from the World Health Organization and cooperating African governments managed an immense reduction in the incidence of onchocerciasis or "river blindness." This disease exists in many parts of the tropical world, where it is carried by a fly with the descriptive name of *simulium damnosum*. In Burkina Faso and parts of northern Ghana, it used to be so serious along certain rivers that as many as 50 percent of middle-aged people had been blinded for life. Many other fertile valleys were left unoccupied because of the disease. The international campaign against its carriers and

intermediate hosts, however, seems to have reduced it to minor proportions in West Africa.

Some diseases are easier to control than others. Yaws has been stamped out in wide regions of the continent. The curative drugs are cheap and can be distributed on a mass basis wherever health services reach all those who are infected.

Schistosomiasis is quite different. It is said to be the most widespread of all human diseases; 150 million people suffer from it chronically. It is caused by parasites of the genus *Schistosoma* that live in fresh water. They enter the human body through the skin and lay eggs which pass back into the water through human waste. After a complex cycle in the water, with snails as an intermediate host, the parasites are again ready to infect anyone who goes wading to fetch water, to wash clothes, or merely to cross a stream. Clean, piped water and efficient sanitation could end the disease, but these simple controls are far too expensive for most African countries. In the past, most of the drugs available against schistosomiasis had serious side effects or were very expensive. In the late 1970s, however, a number of new drugs appeared, which were both cheap and harmless to most patients.

For Africa as a whole, about half the population suffer from schistosomiasis; in some rural areas everyone over the age of two is infected. The disease is rarely fatal and may not be incapacitating for many years. Thus, it escaped notice until recent decades. Doctors now realize that progressive damage to the intestinal tract, lungs, and liver seriously affect the victim's vitality and contribute to early death. The new drugs show some possibilities of control, but general eradication is still years away.

Tropical Africa's bad reputation for health comes mainly from such insect-borne diseases as malaria and yellow fever. Yellow fever (which probably originated in Africa) is carried by *Aedes aegypti*, a mosquito that is fairly easy to control. A simple inoculation can protect the individual. Yellow fever is not likely to be a serious threat in the future, but it played an important role in African history. Infection in childhood is seldom fatal and produces a lifelong immunity. Only strangers who came to Africa as adults died at the first infection.

Malaria was equally dangerous in the past and continues to be a serious problem, harder to control than yellow fever, yaws, or schistosomiasis. It has been wiped out by effective mosquito control on some of the African islands like Mauritius and in North Africa. In tropical Africa, however, intensive mosquito control was tried for fifty years and failed. For a time people hoped for success with DDT, but resistant strains of mosquitos appeared. After World War

II, treatment of malaria with chloroquine looked promising, but the parasite evolved new resistant strains. By the early 1980s, an anti-malarial vaccine appeared to be theoretically possible, but it is not yet tried in practice.

The principal carriers of malaria in tropical Africa are the mosquitoes *Anopheles funestus* and *A. gambiae*. Together they guarantee that most of tropical Africa is a hyperendemic area, where virtually everyone suffers an infective bite. In addition, Africa is one home of falciparum malaria, the type that is most often fatal. Every African child therefore fights a life-and-death struggle with the malarial parasite during the first years of life. As many as half may die before reaching the age of five. The survivors are infected during the remainder of their lives, but rarely suffer from clinical symptoms. They acquire an apparent immunity that hides the progressive damage to the liver and other organs. Before the development of tropical medicine, strangers paid a price in adult mortality similar to that paid by Africans in infancy. With modern drugs, Africa may no longer be the "white man's grave," but it continues to be the "black child's grave" to a degree far beyond the range of recent Western experience.

Sleeping sickness, or trypanosomiasis, is also an insect-borne disease. The vector is the tsetse fly—actually several different flies of the genus *Glossina* carry several different parasites of the genus *Trypanosoma*. Both the disease and the flies are peculiar to Africa; even there they are confined to restricted regions in the humid tropics. Some are found in the forest, while others thrive in wooded or brush-covered savanna. Because these flies cannot survive in open grassland, clearing the brush is one means of control. Like other forms of disease control, this one requires expensive and continuous effort.

Unlike malaria or schistosomiasis, trypanosomiasis is not, in most areas, a direct problem for the human population. Although most types are fatal to people, people are not infected as often as domestic animals or wild game. In the past, epidemics have killed as much as two-thirds of the human population of some small regions, but such occurrences are rare. The continuing and serious problem is with animals. Without cattle, a diet containing enough protein is difficult to acquire. One result of insufficient protein is the prevalence of kwashiorkor, a form of malnutrition caused by the lack of milk and meat that domestic animals could provide. Kwashiorkor in infancy can be permanently damaging.

These diseases are an obvious hindrance to African development today, and they have played an incalculable role in the African past. Three quarters of all the world's cases of schistosomiasis are in

Africa; Africa appears to have far more than its share of hyperendemic falciparum malaria; yellow fever originated in Africa; and trypanosomiasis is still confined to that continent.

Tropical Africa has also had—and still has—the full range of diseases common to Europe and North America. This kept Africa from suffering as South America did on its first contact with European diseases, but one of Africa's most serious disease problems is one it shares with other continents. This is the world-wide emergence of AIDS, the acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Some authorities believe that AIDS originated in Africa, but that theory of origins is only one of several. AIDS did, however, spread at first most rapidly in Africa and North America—among homosexuals in America and through heterosexual contact in Africa.

The first appearance of the new disease was deceptive because it led to its public characterization as peculiar to homosexuals and Africans. Ten years or more can pass between the first infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which causes AIDS and the appearance of the disease itself. Another delay of several years can take place before the victims die, which all of them do. This means that the present number of recorded AIDS cases is only a small indicator of a much larger number of people already infected. The incidence of HIV infection in the mid-1990s showed that it was spreading heterosexually in Europe and North America and that it was spreading rapidly in southern and Southeast Asia, which could soon replace Africa and North America as the principal focus of the disease.

The spread elsewhere does not alter its seriousness for Africa. For 1990, the World Health Organization has recorded 283,000 actual cases of AIDS in Africa, but it estimated that the number actually infected was more likely over five million. The special African problems with HIV infection are poverty and education. It has long been known that the use of condoms can slow the spread of AIDS, but it is hard to convince people of that fact. Even if they were convinced, condoms are very expensive for people with the income levels common in tropical Africa. Poverty also stands in the way of using what treatments are known. The drug AZT can slow down the consequences of the disease, but AZT is expensive and only a tiny minority of Africans with HIV infection have been able to use it. To keep the AIDS epidemic in perspective, it is important to remember that as of 1985, more people died of malaria than died of AIDS. But the long-run picture is more serious, though it is hard to predict from the evidence available. A significant population downturn is possible in the areas that are most severely afflicted.

In addition to the impact of disease on Africans themselves, disease contributed to Africa's isolation by keeping visitors away. Traders who crossed the Sahara from North Africa found that residence in the sudan areas brought disease and death. When they therefore stopped at the desert's edge, tropical Africa lost an opportunity to keep in close contact with the world north of the Sahara. After the fifteenth century, when European traders began to arrive by sea along the African coast, they made the same discovery—that their death rates were astronomical. A few—but only a few—found it worthwhile to take the risk in order to buy gold and slaves. Africa thus remained largely isolated from the intercommunicating zone that stretched from Spain and Morocco to China.

3

MAPPING AFRICA

Early scholars of and travellers in Africa made several assumptions that remained fixed until fairly recent times. The most telling of those assumptions was that everyone in Africa belonged to some "tribe" or other, and that each of those tribes was territorially delimited. Colonial administrators, when they got to Africa in the late 1800s and early 1900s, found such assumptions congenial because administration was easier if each group could be "put into its place." Museums could arrange their displays better if they knew the juxtaposition and historical relationships of the people whose artifacts they displayed.

Such a concern with territorial areas also worked for anthropologists of the early era, who were concerned with what they called "culture areas." The idea of culture areas began in an effort to straighten out the cultures of Native Americans whose cultural traditions had been badly beaten or destroyed. Early anthropologists were in the business of reconstructing them before the memories of older people were completely gone. Mapping culture areas was in the air.

However, maps cast a long shadow: anthropologists, without serious consideration of the results of what they were doing, tried to get a picture of Africa "as it must have been" in what they conceived, erroneously, as a long period of stability before contact with the outside world.

The trouble with mapping is that somebody has to draw a line some place. Those lines—like the international boundaries that were drawn in the early days of colonialism—had an immense effect on our understanding of the situation in the years following. Nobody questions that there are significant differences between the cultures found in coastal West Africa and those found in the sahel, or between the cultural traditions of the Congo Basin and those of the East African Highlands. The trick is in deciding just what criteria you use to draw a line on a map. Those lines are the equivalent of boundaries. Thus maps separating one people from another, no matter how carefully they are made, give a false idea about the relationship of peoples who were separated by those phony lines. Cultural reality is too complex for a simple map—distribution of house types, myths, language, art styles, crops, and market places do not necessarily coincide. Lines on a map, if we read them too

literally, dull our realization of relationships among peoples.

There were time boundaries as well as space boundaries—and they were just as misleading. Too many early anthropologists, under the influence of the reconstructors of Native American cultures, failed to note anything about the colonial administrators, missionaries, traders, and the African men who, in the new situation, had to migrate to the mines or to European farms to earn money to support their families. They also left out "minorities," many of whom had been there for centuries—foreign fishing villages in the midst of farming communities, nomads who crossed and recrossed the territory of settled people, traders belonging to trade diasporas that could stretch for hundreds of miles. Only when these others had been excluded could any subject group be placed within boundaries on a map. The mapmaker's problem was to get all people located in the right place, either to govern or to study them. They left out many minorities; even more important, they left out the relations among the various peoples they divided.

Maps are, however, convenient for providing generalizations—if you do not misuse them. Here we present only two maps, one for the languages of Africa and the second for ecological adaptation. Both represent snap-shots taken at the time of colonial conquest in the late nineteenth century. We also discuss the peoples of Africa briefly, but specifically omit maps of "the races of Africa" of the sort common around the 1930s because the fuzzy idea of race and the precision of lines on a map are simply incompatible. Maps of "the culture areas of Africa" are also omitted; they were important for a few years after the middle 1930s, but they too impart as many falsehoods as they do truths.

The Peoples of Africa

It is always wise to be suspicious of any list of "races," but it is convenient—no matter how unscientific—to mention seven principal physical types in present-day sub-Saharan Africa. In approximate order of their numerical importance they are: 1) Negro, 2) Ethiopian/Somali (formerly called "Hamite," sometimes Erythriote), 3) Caucasian, 4) Indian, 5) Khoisan, 6) Oriental, and 7) Pygmy.

The physical types on our list are those visible to any superficial observer. Negro and Caucasian types are familiar throughout the world. Negro-appearing people are the dominant population in sub-Saharan Africa. People of the other types are either scattered or dominant in a small region.

The Ethiopian/Somali type is dominant in those two countries and in Djibuti—broadly the eastern peninsula called "the Horn of Africa." They are probably a stabilized mixture between people from Arabia and from Africa, but they are a different physical type from either. Past authorities had them classified as a separate "Hamitic" race, sometimes called a sub-class of Caucasian because Amharic, one of their main languages is similar to Arabic and Hebrew. That myth had to be abandoned after the fact sank in that languages are learned, not inherited.

The Khoisan people are another distinct physical type of purely African origin, fairly short, with kinky hair and a yellowish skin. They are found mainly in the southwest—in parts of Botswana, Namibia, and the Republic of South Africa. The name "Khoisan" is a made-up word derived from San (the hunting and gathering peoples formerly called Bushmen) and the Khoikhoi (the cattle-keeping people who once occupied the hinterland of the Cape of Good Hope and were once called by the now-insulting term "Hottentot"). Most authorities think that they and the Pygmies of the forest belt farther north may well represent the remains of a broadly scattered but sparse population that occupied the whole of central and southern Africa before the Negroes moved in from the north during the past three thousand years or so. Pygmies live mainly in the tropical forest, where they continue to specialize in hunting. They are today mixed physically and culturally with their Negro neighbors. Pygmies and Khoisan may have descended from common ancestors, but they look different today.

The groups we have called Caucasian, Oriental, and Indian are all recent immigrants from elsewhere. The main Caucasian group is the settler minority in South Africa and Zimbabwe, descended largely from Dutch and British settlers. Other Caucasian immigrants, largely of French ancestry, are found in North Africa. In the Nilotic Sudan and scattered down the East African coast, the immigrants came from Arabia. They have intermarried with their Negro neighbors for several centuries. In cities everywhere, scattered Caucasian communities from Europe and North America are more numerous than they were during the colonial periods. They tend to live concentrated near buildings labelled "Hilton" or "Novotel."

The largest and oldest settlement of Orientals came earlier to the large island that is now the Malagasy Republic. They came by canoe from Indonesia and settled on the then-uninhabited island. Negroid peoples from the African mainland came later, so that most Malagasy today are mixed, though their Southeast Asian origins are visible. Other Orientals are the Chinese communities of South Africa and the Mascarene Islands—Reunion and Mauritius —and, in smaller numbers, in most African cities.

People of Indian descent are mostly urban people, except in South Africa, Reunion, and Mauritius, where they represent the descendants of migrant sugar workers. Substantial Indian communities, mostly engaged in commerce, are found up and down the East Africa coast and its hinterland. Kenyans of Indian descent are about 3 percent of the population and are important economically. Other, smaller and more scattered Indian communities are found in West Africa as well.

Some authorities would like to sub-divide the Indians into several different physical types, just as others in the past have tried to distinguish "true Negroes," "Bantu," or "Nilotes" among the Negroid-looking Africans. The effort has some merit for trying to trace prehistoric migrations across Africa or India, but such distinctions have little value for understanding recent African history. Race is, after all, in the eye of the beholder.

The Languages of Africa

African languages have sometimes, in the past, been said to be so simple that they contain vocabularies of only a few hundred words or so difficult as to be unlearnable by ordinary Europeans or Americans. Both statements are absurd. African languages are fine instruments that can be as expressive and as expandable as their speakers care to make them.

Some African languages contain consonantal sounds not found elsewhere: the four clicks of the San languages (which have been taken over by some of the surrounding Bantu-speakers) are probably the most famous. The double consonants of some west coast languages occur only there—for example, gb, pronounced by releasing g (with the tongue and roof of the mouth) and b (with the lips) at the same time. African vowel systems tend to be simple like Spanish or Japanese rather than complex as in such languages as French and English.

Many African languages are tonal—a fact that scares off anyone who is preconvinced that tone is difficult and who hence refuses to relax and sing. But anyone can, if they lose their self-consciousness and try, learn to speak African languages. Speakers of Indo-European languages can learn most African languages with somewhat greater ease than they can learn Arabic or Chinese or Hungarian. On the other hand, they should not confuse a

smattering of what is called "kitchen Swahili" or "trader Hausa" with knowing an African language.

There are many languages in Africa: over 1,400 even if one allows for possible misclassification when several dialects of a language are counted as separate distinct languages. Joseph Greenberg made the current classification in the 1960s. His classification recognizes five major language groups, shown on figure 4. Far and away the

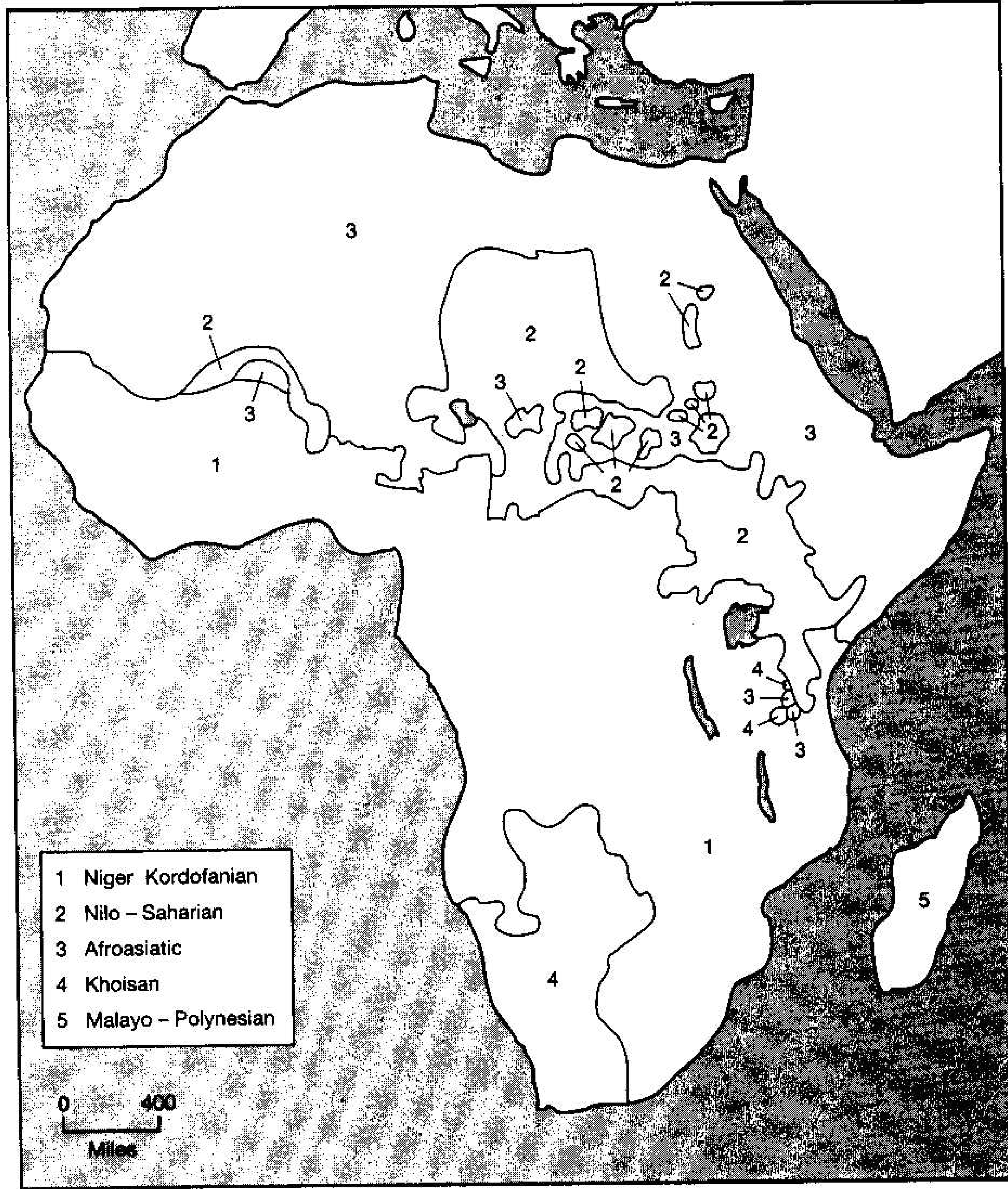

Figure 4. The languages of Africa.

largest of the language groups is the group that Greenberg calls the Niger-Kordofanian group of families. Its most important member is the Benue-Congo family of languages, which subdivides into six subfamilies. One of these subfamilies contains the well-known "Bantu languages" which cover most of central and southern Africa—but all are closely related to one another, reflecting the fact that it has been only in recent centuries that the Bantu peoples have spread into the forest regions and down the eastern and southern highlands.

The second large group, called the Nilo-Saharan, includes the languages spoken by the Nilotes as well as many spoken in the western sudan and the area of the middle Niger River.

The Afro-Asiatic group of languages contains Semitic languages that are spoken in Southwest Asia as well as in North Africa; it also contains Arabic, Hebrew, Berber, and Cushitic languages, as well as various languages spoken today around Lake Chad, of which the most significant is Hausa. Of the four major branches of this group, only the Semitic languages extend into Asia. The others, with their many individual languages, are spoken in Africa. This does not mean, of course, that the ancestors of the people who speak Hebrew or Arabic ever came from Africa. Languages can be learned. The only language group that even vaguely corresponds to physical appearance is the Khoisan—and even here the distinctive clicks have worked their way into the languages of their neighbors like the Zulu.

The final African language group is Malagasy, spoken all over the island of Madagascar. Malagasy is the first African language to be written in Roman script (several before it had been written in Arabic script)—missionaries reduced it to writing in the 1820s. As a result the Malagasy national archives today contain government documents in that language going back a full sixty years before the French conquest of 1895.

In most of Africa, colonial languages became the official languages of law, politics, journalism, and education. Africans educated in Europe began using them well before the colonial period had even begun. Africans have published books in European languages since the eighteenth century, several dozen of them before the colonial period. They still do. English and French have become the ordinary vehicle for African authors who want to reach a wide audience, and the names of Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, and Ousemane Sembene have become internationally known. Only recently, the first Nobel Prize in literature to be awarded to an African went to Wole Soyinka—for works written in English.

The presence of foreign traders—in some numbers since the

seventeenth century—led to new, mixed languages called "pidgins" (from the pidgin-Chinese word for business). In time they came to be established as the first language for some speakers. When that happens, the languages are called "creoles," after the similarly mixed Afro-European languages of the Americas.

In the Cape Verde islands and in Guinea-Bissau, Portuguese-African creoles have existed for centuries—formal languages with their own grammars and dictionaries. In the Indian Ocean islands of Reunion and Mauritius, the normal language is an Afro-French creole, though the official languages are French and English respectively, despite the majority of the population being descended from immigrants from India. In Sierra Leone, a similar creole, called Krio, is the language of discourse in the Freetown area; it serves as the language of trade in the interior markets.

Krio is not only a creole, but a *lingua franca*. Although the original lingua franca was that variant of Italian which served as the language of commerce in the Medieval Mediterranean, today the term means a language used for communication by people for whom it is not the home language. In East Africa, Swahili (a Bantu language with many Arabic and English loan-words) is the language of the coast of East Africa. It is the home language of comparatively few people, but serves as the second language for many millions. It is the official language of Kenya and Tanzania. In Tanzania all children must be educated in Swahili through primary school.

Language is an important policy issue all over Africa. African governments and intellectuals know that they need access to one of the world languages, preferably English. At the same time, they want to preserve their African heritage. Thus all Tanzanians learn two languages in school: Swahili and English—and that may be in addition to whatever language they speak at home (although the home language of urban children is likely to be Swahili).

Other countries began with English, or even switched to English. Ethiopia has Amharic as an ancient written language, but it adopted English-language education after the Second World War because Amharic was not popular with the non-Amharic-speaking majority, and because English provided an easier and quicker access to the broader world.

In mapping African languages, we placed them where they were about the beginning of the colonial period. But languages move when people move, and sometimes they spread without any migration. The actual languages spoken in Africa have shifted a little with the massive movements of people in the twentieth century. Most Africans already spoke two or more languages with varying degrees of competence. As they move, they learn to speak

more languages, and with years of residence in a foreign place to speak them better. This is one reason why the use of European languages and other linguae francae has become so important in this century.

Subsistence Areas of Africa

The next area of mappable culture in Africa is the overlapping zones or belts of traditional subsistence crops, determined in part by the patterns of weather and climate shown in figure 5. However, no map can give a clear account of a country like Nigeria, which exports oil and imports much of its food. We can, however, show areas of African subsistence before extensive trade and importation began.

The subsistence areas are important for some other aspects of culture. Subsistence activity shows a close correspondence with the working habits of both sexes; with the size and composition of work groups; with trade; with diet patterns; indeed, even with musculature of the body. It is also true that subsistence patterns were relatively little changed by the colonial experience.

Foraging

There are—or were until very recently—a few remnant groups who subsist on a foraging economy. The Pygmies of the forests of Zaire are primarily hunters and gatherers (although trade with neighboring farmers brings them part of their vegetable food); so are the San of southern Africa. The most important group of foragers are the fishermen on the coasts and rivers. Fishermen are among the few Africans who do not show dietary deficiencies. They usually trade a part of their catch for vegetables and one or more of the starchy staples. Women of the group grow some grain or tubers.

Herding

African herders are primarily cattle herders, although the Sahara shelters a few peoples who keep camels, and the Serengeti plain and other areas in East Africa are the home of peoples who keep large flocks of goats (that animal being all but ubiquitous on the continent, in any event). Herdsmen's diets may center on milk as a staple, but almost all herding peoples add starchy staples, either by harvesting their own crops or, more commonly, through well-integrated systems of trade with settled agricultural peoples.

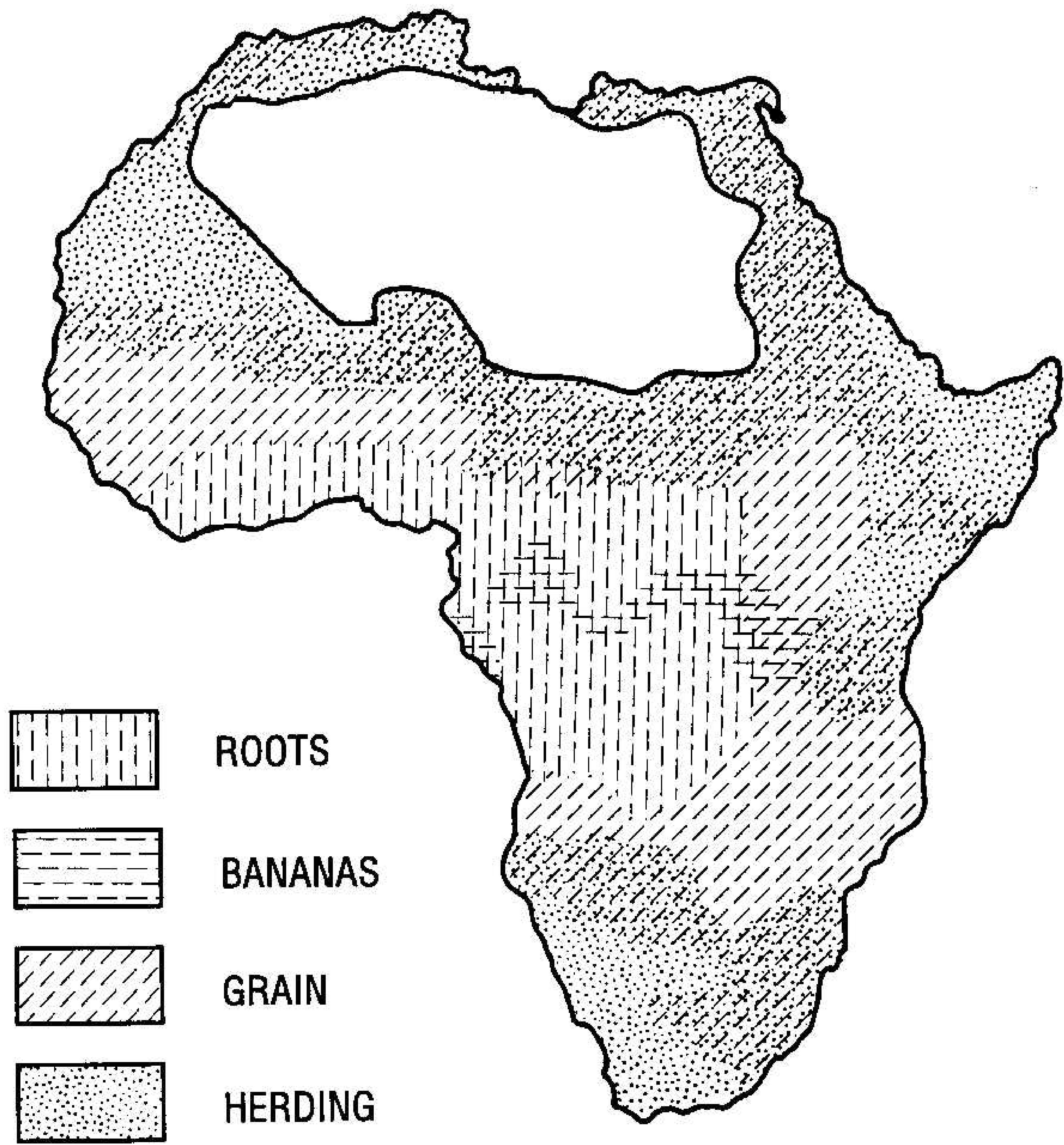

Figure 5. Subsistence areas of Africa.

Camel herders are found throughout the inhabited Sahara and on both its northern and southern fringe, as well as in the eastern Horn. The "cattle belt" of Africa runs from the Atlantic in Senegal, along the corridor between the forests and the desert with only a few breaks, then turns south along the Nile. From Lake Victoria it proceeds southward, eventually swinging back to the Atlantic in Angola, south of the forests of the Congo but north of the Kalahari Desert. Much of the area of East and South Africa, where cattle are the greatest concern but do not actually form the subsistence base or provide the staple part of the diet, must be included in the "grain

belt," the staple being maize or sorghum. Cattle do, however, form the basis of the morality and prestige activities of the men of that area, and many pastoralists exchange dairy products for grain.

A great deal has been written about the East African herding peoples who tap blood from the neck veins of their cattle, mix it with sour milk, and eat the mixture. Actual studies by food economists, dieticians, and geographers, however, have recently indicated that blood accounts for at most a few hundreds of calories a week. Milk and butter are much more important. People seldom kill animals for meat, but do of course eat those they sacrifice.

Agriculture

By far the greatest number of Africans are farmers. They can be sensibly divided into three groups: those among whom grain crops are the major staple, those who grow root crops, and those who grow tree crops. Bananas, a tree crop, are the basis of the diet in a belt stretching westward from the vicinity of Lake Victoria to the Atlantic. These bananas are not the sweet bananas that Americans and Europeans eat for breakfast or dessert, but are plantains—scarcely sweet, much starchier, and of a less oily consistency. Plantains are cooked and, like the grain and the roots, made into porridge. Dates form a staple in a relatively large area of the Sahara.

The grain belt forms a crescent, inside of and overlapping with the herding crescent. There is another, smaller grain belt along the Mediterranean coast, where the staple grains are barley and wheat. South of the Sahara, however, the grains are of a different sort. Farmers from Senegal south through Liberia and into the Ivory Coast grow an indigenous African variety of rice as their staple food. They grow it either as upland rice or sow it into patches which they have cleared out of the forest. Although African rice has remained a staple in this area, much of the acreage has been put into Asian rice, which Africans consider superior.

As one proceeds eastward from Senegal, the grain changes to sorghum and millet. Still farther east, in the southern sudan and Ethiopia, the primary grains are eleusine, teff, and fonio. As one turns south, east of Lake Victoria, maize and sorghum are the staples; there is some pearl millet in the southern Congo area and in a few others, but aside from that, maize and sorghum form the staples all the way to the southern end of the continent.

Throughout the grain-producing areas of Africa, the mode of agriculture and the nature of the diet are similar. The chief agricultural implements are the hoe—short-handled in most places but long-handled in parts of Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Zaire—and

the long knife called a *matchet* in western Africa and a *panga* in Swahili-speaking areas. In some places the digging stick, with or without a metal tip, is still to be found. The plow, pulled by oxen, is found today in parts of eastern and southern Africa. In most places—but there are, as usual, exceptions—the heavy work of clearing the land is done by men, who also prepare the fields for planting and may do the planting. The women then take over—if they have not indeed been doing the work already—and take care of weeding and harvesting. It is also the women who carry the grain back to the homestead or to the drying platforms. It is stored in granaries which are made, in most areas, something like the houses but smaller and usually set up off the ground to give some protection from termites, rats, and other pests. These granaries—and the food in them—are often the property of the household head, but the food is just as often considered the property of the woman who is obliged to feed her children from it as well as her husband, who provided her with land and cleared it for her.

Except for rice, which is cooked whole, grain in Africa is ground—traditionally by hand on stone, today often by hand-operated mills or power mills at the village or town center—and cooked into porridge. A thick, malleable porridge is Africa's bread, providing most of the calories of most African diets. It is eaten dipped into a sauce of meat or vegetables or both. Oils and fats are plentiful—the particular one varies with the part of the country—from shea butter to palm oil to peanut oil to sesame oil and many others. Oils are part of the sauce, not of the porridge.

The subsistence area based on root crops forms a core in the Congo basin, with a long strip along the Guinea coast. Crops are yams, manioc, taro, sweet potatoes, and a few other minor root crops. None of these roots, it would appear, is indigenous to Africa. The yam is Malaysian (not the sweet potatoes that Americans call yams, which are also present); manioc is South American.

Root crops, as food, are generally considered by Western dieticians to be inferior to grains, because they lack some of the essential vitamins and minerals. Growing root crops puts a little more work on the men, who must, in the shallow soil, make two-foot mounds in which to grow yams, or smaller ones in which to grow manioc or sweet potatoes. Roots are either cooked green or else dried and made into a flour, then mashed or stewed into porridge and eaten with sauces.

Drink as well as food follows the same mapped areas. Again to oversimplify, herders drink honey beer, although some of them make beer from traded grain. In the grain belt, arguments rage about the virtues and faults of beer made with maize, sorghum, and

millet. In the banana country, bananas are mashed and made into beer. Root crop country is approximately the same as oil palm country; there the staple beverage is palm wine.

Westerners who are thoroughly familiar with market economy and with the particular tensions and insecurities it brings would do well to remember that subsistence economy also brings its own tensions: food during the next year is totally dependent on one's own labors and on the fruits of one's fields, more or less ameliorated by dependence on kinsmen. Droughts and floods, locusts and birds are personal enemies. Religious myth and ritual, like insecurity, center around food production. Africans who have entered a market economy are adjusting to new types of insecurities: unemployment, boring jobs, loss of self-determination. Yet with most Africans, even now, subsistence is a major psychic as well as practical pursuit. In creating subsistence, one must work with and cooperate with kinsmen, neighbors, and the forces of the gods.