

Unit 1: Origins of the African Diaspora

Unit 1 covers the deep African roots that the rest of the course builds on. It begins with the field of African American Studies itself, then moves through Africa's geography and peoples, its ancient societies and Sudanic empires, its traditions of learning and spirituality, and the first encounters between Africans and Europeans that set the transatlantic world in motion.

AP African American Studies

Origins of the African Diaspora

About 14 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the topics build on each other. The geography explains the economies, the economies explain the empires, the empires explain the learning traditions and spiritual life, and all of it explains what enslaved Africans carried with them into the diaspora. The field of African American Studies frames how scholars study this material.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the tables to review the distinctions that exam questions test most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Origins of the African Diaspora is about 20 to 25 percent of the AP exam score. The exam has 60 multiple-choice questions, 4 free-response questions, and an individual student project completed during the course. This unit carries extra weight because everything later in the course, from the Middle Passage to the movements of the twentieth century, traces back to the societies and traditions you meet here.

1.1 What Is African American Studies?

African American Studies is an interdisciplinary field that studies the histories, cultures, politics, and experiences of people of African descent. It draws on methods from history, literature, sociology, political science, and other disciplines. One of its central concepts is the **diaspora**, the global dispersion of African peoples from their homeland and the communities and cultures they built abroad.

The field did not begin in a library. It grew out of the **Black Campus Movement** of 1965 to 1972, a wave of student protests and strikes demanding Black Studies programs on college campuses. The first Black Studies department in the United States was established at San Francisco State College in 1968, after a student strike. Knowing this origin matters for the exam, because it shows the field was built through organized student action, not simply granted by institutions.

Trap. Do not shrink the field to "the history of slavery." African American Studies covers art, religion, politics, migration, and global Black life, and it uses many disciplines to do it. A question that describes a literary analysis of a Harlem Renaissance poem is still describing African American Studies.

1.2 The African Continent: A Varied Landscape

The single most important habit for this unit is refusing to treat Africa as one place. The continent has five major rivers named in the course: the **Niger** in West Africa, the **Congo** in Central Africa, the **Nile** along which Egypt and Nubia emerged, the **Zambezi** in Southern Africa, and the **Orange** in Southern Africa. It has five distinct climate zones, each shaping the economies and ways of life of the societies living in it, and it is bounded by the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Indian Ocean, which tied its societies into wider trade networks.

Geography explains economies. Sahelian societies built wealth on trans-Saharan trade across the desert. Nile societies built wealth on river agriculture. Coastal societies built wealth on Indian Ocean and Atlantic commerce. The empires in this unit look different from one another because the land they sat on offered different possibilities.

Trap. "Africa" is not a setting, it is a continent with deserts, rainforests, savannas, highlands, and coasts. When a question asks why Ghana grew rich on gold and salt while Great Zimbabwe grew rich on Indian Ocean trade, the answer starts with where each one sat on the map.

1.3 Population Growth and Ethnolinguistic Diversity

Africa's population grew as farming and ironworking spread, and one of the great population movements in human history drove that spread. The **Bantu expansion**, from about 1500 BCE to 500 CE, carried Bantu-speaking peoples across sub-Saharan Africa, along with ironworking and crop cultivation. It is why related languages are spoken across much of the continent today.

The **Bantu language family** includes languages such as Xhosa, Swahili, Kikongo, and Zulu. That diversity within the family is the point. These are distinct languages spoken by distinct peoples, not dialects of one tongue.

Trap. "Bantu" names a language family, not a single people or a single language. If an exam option says the Bantu expansion spread one uniform culture across Africa, that option is wrong. It spread languages, iron, and farming through many different societies over two thousand years.

1.4 Africa's Ancient Societies

Complex societies in Africa are older than most students expect, and they were connected to the wider world. **Egypt and Nubia** emerged along the Nile around 3000 BCE. **Nubia**, also called **Kush**, sat south of Egypt and was the source of Egypt's gold and luxury trade goods, which made the two societies both partners and rivals. Around 750 BCE the relationship reversed: Nubian rulers conquered Egypt and held its throne for roughly a century as the **25th Dynasty**, sometimes called the Black Pharaohs. The Nubian city of **Meroë** developed its own system of writing.

Farther south, the **Aksumite Empire** rose in present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia from around 100 BCE as a Red Sea trading power. It minted its own currency and developed the **Ge'ez** script and language, which remains the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Under **King Ezana**, Aksum adopted Christianity in the 330s CE, becoming the first African kingdom to take Christianity as its state religion. In West Africa, the **Nok** society of present-day Nigeria, from around 500 BCE, worked iron and left behind naturalistic terracotta sculptures of people and animals.

Trap. Keep Nubia distinct from Egypt. Nubia was its own society with its own writing at Meroë, and for about a century its kings ruled Egypt, not the other way around. Questions about the 25th Dynasty are testing whether you know the direction of that conquest.

1.5 The Sudanic Empires: Ghana, Mali, and Songhai

The **Sudanic (Sahelian) empires** of West Africa rose from the seventh to the sixteenth century, each reaching its height as the previous one declined. Their wealth came from controlling trans-Saharan trade, especially the exchange of West African gold for North African salt, and that trade also brought Islam, scholars, and administrators into the region.

The **Ghana Empire**, the earliest of the three, flourished from about the sixth to the thirteenth century in what is now Mauritania and Mali. It grew rich by taxing the gold and salt caravans crossing the Sahara. The **Mali Empire** followed, flourishing from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. Its founder, Sundiata Keita, built the empire around 1235, and in the fourteenth century it was ruled by **Mansa Musa**, whose **1324 hajj** to Mecca displayed Mali's wealth to the wider world. The writer al-Umari reported that Musa's spending in Cairo depressed gold prices there. A generation later, the **Catalan Atlas** of 1375, drawn by Abraham Cresques, showed Musa crowned and holding gold, proof that Mali's reputation had reached European mapmakers. The **Songhai Empire**, the last and largest of the three, flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from its capital at Gao, until a Moroccan invasion ended it in 1591 and trade shifted from trans-Saharan routes to Atlantic ones.

EMPIRE	WHEN	KNOWN FOR
Ghana	6th to 13th century	Taxing trans-Saharan gold and salt trade; the "land of gold."
Mali	13th to 17th century	Mansa Musa's 1324 hajj; Timbuktu's learning; shown on the 1375 Catalan Atlas.
Songhai	15th to 16th century	The largest of the three; Askia Muhammad's administration; ended by Morocco in 1591.

Trap. Two mix-ups cost points here. First, the order is Ghana, then Mali, then Songhai. Second, the famous pilgrimage to Mecca belongs to Mansa Musa of Mali in 1324, not to Askia Muhammad. Askia ruled Songhai and also made a pilgrimage, in the 1490s, but the 1324 journey that put Mali on European maps was Musa's.

1.6 Learning Traditions

West African societies maintained learning through two great traditions, oral and written, and the exam expects you to respect both. **Timbuktu**, a trading city in Mali, became a center of Islamic learning with an active book trade, a university, and a scholarly community that drew astronomers, mathematicians, architects, and jurists. Its manuscript libraries are evidence of a written intellectual culture centuries deep.

Alongside it stood the **griots**, prestigious historians, storytellers, and musicians who preserved and transmitted a community's history and traditions. The tradition included both women and men. The **Epic of Sundiata**, the Mande oral narrative of Sundiata Keita, founder of the Mali Empire and ancestor of Mansa Musa, survives because griots carried it across generations.

Trap. Do not treat oral tradition as the absence of history. Griots were trained specialists with a deliberate method of preserving the past, and written traditions like the Ge'ez script and the Timbuktu manuscripts existed at the same time. An option that calls precolonial Africa a place without records is always wrong.

1.7 Indigenous Cosmologies and Religious Syncretism

When Islam and Christianity arrived in Africa, they did not simply replace what was there. **Religious syncretism** is the blending of introduced faiths with Indigenous spiritual beliefs and cosmologies, and it shaped religious life across West and West Central Africa. Afonso I of Kongo practiced an African form of Catholicism, and Malian rulers combined Islamic practice with older Mande traditions.

Yoruba religion centers on the **orishas**, deities that include **Shango**, the orisha of thunder, fire, and lightning, remembered as a deified ancestor and monarch of the Oyo kingdom, along with Oya and Ogun. These beliefs crossed the Atlantic with enslaved Yoruba people and live on in diasporic religions. **Louisiana Voodoo** is one such survival: an African diasporic religion in which West and West Central African practices like ancestor veneration, divination, healing, and collective singing and dancing endured in the Americas.

Trap. Syncretism is blending, not erasure. A question describing enslaved people practicing Catholicism while honoring the orishas is showing continuity with African spiritual life, not the disappearance of it. Watch for the names Shango, Oya, and Ogun as signals.

1.8 Culture and Trade in Southern and East Africa

Southern and East Africa built their own centers of wealth and culture. **Great Zimbabwe**, a stone-built trading city of the Shona people, flourished from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. Its Great Enclosure and conical tower, built without mortar, still stand as evidence of a society organized enough to raise them and rich enough, through gold and Indian Ocean trade, to afford them.

On the **Swahili Coast**, Bantu-speaking city-states adopted Islam and traded from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, linking Africa to Arabia, Persia, India, and China. **Sawahil** is the Arabic term for the coastal region, meaning "the coasts." Portuguese ships arrived in the 1490s, and their arrival redirected the region's trade toward European-controlled Atlantic networks.

1.9 West Central Africa: The Kingdom of Kongo

The **Kingdom of Kongo** was one of the most powerful states in West Central Africa, and its history with Portugal shows African rulers acting, not just being acted upon. In 1491, **Nzinga a Nkuwu** converted to Christianity and took the Portuguese name **João I**. His son **Nzinga Mbemba**, known as **Afonso I**, developed a distinct African form of Catholicism that blended the new faith with Kongo traditions. When Portuguese merchants began carrying Kongo people into slavery, Afonso wrote letters to the Portuguese king João III in the 1520s protesting the trade, even as it enriched his own rivals.

Kongo's cultural imprint crossed the Atlantic. **Day names**, the Kongolesse practice of naming a child for the day of birth, were carried to the Americas by enslaved Africans. Kongo also became the largest single source region of enslaved people transported to the Americas, which makes its early diplomatic resistance part of the story of the slave trade itself.

Trap. Afonso's letters are evidence of African political agency. Do not read them as proof that Kongo was passive or that Christianity was simply imposed. Afonso used a European faith and European diplomacy to argue, in writing, against the Portuguese slave trade.

1.10 Kinship and Political Leadership

Political authority in many African societies ran through kinship, and women held formal power within it. In the Kingdom of Benin, **Queen Idia** became the first **iyoba**, or queen mother, in the early 1500s, after advising her son Oba Esigie in war and politics. An ivory mask bearing her likeness became the symbol of **FESTAC**, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, held in Nigeria in 1977.

In West Central Africa, **Queen Njinga** ruled Ndongo-Matamba and waged roughly thirty years of guerrilla warfare against Portuguese expansion, directing resistance from her **kilombo**, a Kimbundu word for war camp. Her long campaign shows that African resistance to European encroachment was organized, sustained, and led from the top of a state.

1.11 Global Africans

Africans were part of the wider world long before the transatlantic slave trade. By 1500, about 50,000 enslaved Africans had been transported to the Atlantic islands and Europe through West African and Portuguese trade networks. On **Cabo Verde and São Tomé**, Portuguese-run sugar plantations worked by enslaved African labor became the model for plantation slavery in the Americas.

The first documented Africans in English North America arrived in late August **1619**, when the White Lion reached Point Comfort, Virginia, with "20 and odd" Africans. They had been taken from the Portuguese ship São João Bautista and came from the region of Ndongo, in what is now Angola. What followed was not instant, formal slavery. In 1640, John Punch was sentenced to lifetime service by the Virginia Governor's Council while his two European fellow runaways received extended terms. Virginia passed **partus sequitur ventrem** in 1662, making a child's status follow the mother's, and a comprehensive slave code in 1705, after Bacon's Rebellion of 1676. Racial, hereditary slavery was built law by law over decades.

Trap. 1619 marks the documented arrival of the first Africans in English North America, not the start of formal slavery. Students lose points by treating 1619 as the year slavery began. The legal system of slavery was constructed over decades, through cases like John Punch's in 1640 and statutes like the 1662 and 1705 laws.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
Ghana, Mali, Songhai	The order is Ghana first, then Mali, then Songhai. Ghana is the gold and salt trade. Mali is Mansa Musa and 1324. Songhai is the largest and the last, ending in 1591.
Mansa Musa vs Askia Muhammad	Musa ruled Mali in the 1300s and made the 1324 hajj. Askia ruled Songhai in the 1400s and made his own pilgrimage in the 1490s. Same region, different empire, different century.
1619 vs formal slavery	1619 is the documented arrival of the first Africans in English North America. Formal slavery was built later, through the 1640 Punch case and the 1662 and 1705 laws.
Nzinga a Nkuwu vs Afonso I	The father converted in 1491 and took the name João I. The son, Afonso I, blended Catholicism with Kongo tradition and wrote the 1520s letters protesting the slave trade.
Nubia vs Egypt	Nubia (Kush) was its own society with its own writing at Meroë. Around 750 BCE its kings conquered Egypt and ruled it for roughly a century as the 25th Dynasty.
Oral vs written tradition	Griots preserved history through trained oral transmission, and written traditions existed too: the Ge'ez script of Aksum and the manuscript libraries of Timbuktu.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

Questions 1 through 4 refer to the following description. The Catalan Atlas, drawn in 1375 by the cartographer Abraham Cresques in Majorca, shows the Malian ruler Mansa Musa seated on a throne, wearing a crown and holding a golden orb. He holds up a large gold nugget toward a merchant. The atlas was made more than fifty years after the ruler's famous journey across North Africa to Mecca.

1. The journey most directly connected to the Catalan Atlas image is

1. Askia Muhammad's pilgrimage to Mecca in the 1490s
2. Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324
3. Sundiata Keita's founding of the Mali Empire around 1235
4. the Moroccan conquest of Songhai in 1591

2. The Catalan Atlas image best supports which of the following conclusions about Mali?

1. Mali controlled the Atlantic slave trade in the 1300s
2. Mali was a Christian kingdom allied with Portugal
3. Mali's wealth and reputation were known to traders and mapmakers outside Africa
4. The image shows Songhai at the height of its power

3. A student claims that Mansa Musa's pilgrimage caused gold prices in Cairo to rise. Which of the following best corrects this claim?

1. Musa never traveled through Cairo on his pilgrimage
2. The writer al-Umari reported that Musa's spending depressed gold prices in Cairo
3. Al-Umari traveled with Musa and recorded the journey firsthand
4. The pilgrimage took place in 1424, not 1324

4. Which of the following statements about the Sudanic empires is accurate?

1. Songhai was the earliest of the three empires
2. Ghana and Mali flourished at the same time
3. All three empires were centered on the Atlantic coast
4. Ghana, Mali, and Songhai rose in that order, each peaking as the previous one declined

Questions 5 through 8 refer to the following description. In the 1520s, Afonso I, the Christian king of Kongo, wrote letters to King João III of Portugal. Afonso protested that Portuguese merchants were carrying off his people into slavery, including members of the royal family, and asked the Portuguese king to bring the trade to an end.

5. Afonso's letters best demonstrate which of the following?

1. Kongo's rulers were powerless against Portuguese merchants
2. African rulers exercised political agency and resisted the slave trade through diplomacy
3. Kongo had no prior contact with Europe before the letters
4. The letters converted the Portuguese court to Catholicism

6. Afonso's father, Nzinga a Nkuwu, is significant in Kongo's history because he

1. converted to Christianity in 1491 and took the Portuguese name João I
2. led the famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324
3. founded the Mali Empire around 1235
4. wrote the letters protesting the Portuguese slave trade

7. In late August 1619, the White Lion arrived at Point Comfort, Virginia, carrying "20 and odd" Africans who had been taken from the Portuguese ship *São João Bautista*. These captives came from the region of Ndongo. Which of the following is the best historical interpretation of this event?

1. It marks the beginning of formal, lifelong slavery in Virginia
2. The Africans were purchased directly from traders on the West African coast
3. It marks the documented arrival of the first Africans in English North America, but formal slavery was built through later laws over decades
4. John Punch, sentenced to lifetime service in 1640, was among these arrivals

8. Virginia's 1662 law of *partus sequitur ventrem* and its comprehensive slave code of 1705 are best understood as

1. steps in the legal construction of racial, hereditary slavery over several decades
2. declarations of independence from English legal authority
3. laws that freed the children of enslaved mothers
4. immediate responses to the White Lion's arrival in 1619

Answer Key

- 1. B.** The atlas shows Mansa Musa, the fourteenth-century Malian ruler, and the journey that made him famous was his 1324 hajj to Mecca. A names the wrong ruler: Askia Muhammad's pilgrimage belonged to Songhai in the 1490s, more than a century after the atlas image's subject. C names an earlier event, Sundiata's founding of Mali around 1235, which did not involve a journey to Mecca. D names the wrong empire and the wrong century: the 1591 Moroccan conquest ended Songhai, not Mali.
- 2. C.** A Spanish cartographer drawing Mali's ruler with gold more than fifty years after the hajj shows that Mali's wealth was known far beyond Africa. A is wrong because Mali's wealth came from trans-Saharan gold and salt trade, not the Atlantic slave trade, which developed later. B is wrong because Musa was a Muslim ruler; the Christian kingdom in this unit is Kongo. D is wrong because the image shows Mansa Musa of Mali, while Songhai reached its height about a century later.
- 3. B.** Al-Umari reported that Musa spent and gave away so much gold in Cairo that its price fell, the opposite of the student's claim. A is wrong because Musa did travel through Cairo on the way to Mecca. C is wrong because al-Umari was a later writer who reported the story, not a traveling companion. D is wrong because the pilgrimage took place in 1324; 1424 is a full century off.
- 4. D.** The Sudanic empires rose in sequence: Ghana first, then Mali, then Songhai, each peaking as the previous one declined. A reverses the order; Songhai was the last and largest. B is wrong because the empires were sequential, not simultaneous. C is wrong because these were interior West African empires built on trans-Saharan trade, not Atlantic coastal states.
- 5. B.** A king writing formal diplomatic letters to another monarch to protest the slave trade is an act of political agency, not passivity. A misreads the evidence: the letters show Afonso pushing back, not surrendering. C is wrong because Kongo had decades of contact with Portugal by the 1520s, beginning with the 1491 conversion. D reverses the direction: the Portuguese were already Catholic; it was Kongo's rulers who had adopted the faith.
- 6. A.** Nzinga a Nkuwu converted to Christianity in 1491 and took the Portuguese name João I, opening Kongo's relationship with Portugal. B attributes Mansa Musa's 1324 hajj to him, the wrong person and the wrong religion. C attributes Sundiata Keita's founding of Mali to him, the wrong person and the wrong region. D attributes his son Afonso's letters to him; the 1520s protests were written by Afonso I, not his father.
- 7. C.** The White Lion's arrival is the documented beginning of African presence in English North America, but Virginia's system of formal, lifelong slavery was constructed later, through cases like John Punch's in 1640 and laws in 1662 and 1705. A collapses decades of legal development into a single year. B is wrong because the captives were taken at sea from a Portuguese slave ship, not purchased directly on the African coast. D confuses two separate documented events: Punch was sentenced in 1640, twenty-one years after the White Lion arrived.
- 8. A.** The 1662 law made enslavement hereditary through the mother, and the 1705 code consolidated a comprehensive system of slavery. Together they show a legal system being built in stages over more than forty years. B is wrong because these laws tightened colonial control; they had nothing to do with independence. C states the opposite of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which bound the children of enslaved mothers. D is wrong because these laws came forty and eighty-six years after 1619, in response to a growing enslaved population and events like Bacon's Rebellion, not to the White Lion itself.

When you check your answers, note which distinction each miss came from. Make a flashcard for that distinction and drill it spaced out over the next few days instead of rereading the whole section. If you

missed one of these questions, the same distinction is worth practicing again in Rycal, where the AP African American Studies deck has flashcards for it and more practice questions use the same kinds of traps.

One-Page Recall Check

Say each answer out loud before you look back, and mark the ones you cannot finish. Anything you cannot say out loud yet belongs in your flashcard deck. In Rycal, add those items to the AP African American Studies deck and let spaced review bring them back over the next few days.

- Define African American Studies and name the movement and the 1968 campus milestone behind it.
- Name the five major rivers of Africa from the course and explain how geography shaped different economies.
- Describe the Bantu expansion and explain why "Bantu" names a language family, not one people.
- Explain the relationship between Nubia and Egypt, including the 25th Dynasty.
- Name what Aksum is known for: trade, currency, Ge'ez, and King Ezana's conversion.
- Put Ghana, Mali, and Songhai in order and name what each is known for.
- Explain the significance of Mansa Musa's 1324 hajj, including the al-Umari report and the Catalan Atlas.
- Distinguish Mansa Musa's 1324 pilgrimage from Askia Muhammad's pilgrimage in the 1490s.
- Describe Timbuktu's learning community and the role of griots, including the Epic of Sundiata.
- Define religious syncretism and give examples, including the orishas and Louisiana Voodoo.
- Explain Afonso I's 1520s letters and what they show about African political agency.
- Describe Queen Idia and Queen Njinga and the kind of power each held.
- Explain what the 1619 White Lion arrival was and was not, and name the 1640, 1662, and 1705 legal milestones that built formal slavery.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the AP African American Studies deck. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

African American Studies, Diaspora, Black Campus Movement, San Francisco State College, Niger River, Congo River, Nile River, Zambezi River, Orange River, Bantu expansion, Bantu language family, Egypt, Nubia (Kush), 25th Dynasty, Meroë, Aksumite Empire, King Ezana, Ge'ez, Nok, Sudanic empires, Ghana Empire, Mali Empire, Songhai Empire, Mansa Musa, Catalan Atlas, Trans-Saharan trade, Timbuktu, Griots, Epic of Sundiata, Religious syncretism, Orishas, Shango, Louisiana Voodoo, Great Zimbabwe, Swahili Coast, Sawahil, Kingdom of Kongo, Nzinga a Nkuwu (João I), Afonso I, Day names, Queen Idia, Iyoba, FESTAC, Queen Njinga, Kilombo, Cabo Verde, São Tomé, White Lion, John Punch, Partus sequitur ventrem.

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