Benin

**ANCIENT BENIN**

The ancient kingdom of Benin began way back in BCE times. They were not conquered until the 1800's in modern times, so they had quite a run. The people in the forest regions of Africa were not affected by the Muslim culture or the religious teachings of Islam. The first Muslim merchants did not push their way south until the 1600's. By then, their culture had developed. The kingdom and the capital city were both called Benin. The city of Benin was laid out in a system of huge straight streets. These streets were very wide, very long, and well maintained although they were not paved. You could travel on foot in a straight line for 15 or 20 minutes and not see the end of the street. Other streets opened from the main streets. They were also wide. Houses were built in rows along all of the streets.

**ART AND MUSIC**

If there were such a thing as an artist colony in Africa, that colony would have been Benin. But people did not come from all over the world to live in Benin to learn about art and bronze making. Rather, the people of Benin sent their art out all over the world via trade with other African kingdoms, who traded the art on to Muslim visitors. Benin produced some of the most wonderful art in Africa. Their sculpture was playful and fun. Their carved wood masks are still world famous.

Their musical instruments included sticks, drums, and thumb pianos.

**TRADE**

Benin traded with other African kingdoms and with the Dutch and Portuguese traders who came by sea. Benin offered woven striped garments that were popular on the Gold Coast, blue fabric, pepper, jasper stones, and leopard skins. In exchange, Benin wanted red and silver fabrics - cotton, red velvet, embroidered silk, coarse flannel - candied oranges and lemons, mirrors, and iron bars. Jewelry was traded on both sides. Benin traders were very shrew. They had a certain way of trading. If you didn't trade their way, they wouldn't trade. They might negotiate for days, or weeks, or even months before they would trade for goods. It was not easy to trade with Benin, but it was profitable. The artists of Benin were quite talented, and the demand for Benin striped fabrics, bronze statues, and carved masks was high.

**DID KIDS GO TO SCHOOL?**

They did not go to school in a building. Rather, in the evening, in the olden days of Benin, the village collected together to listen to the storytellers. Mothers and fathers taught kids at home. Those practicing a trade would accept children as students to teach them their trade. Children learned from the elders of the village who used proverbs to teach good behavior. There is a wonderful African proverb that states, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

**DECLINE OF BENIN**

The British finally conquered Benin in the late 1800's. That was the end of the Kingdom of Benin, but not the end of the people. In time, the people in the region of Benin were able to establish independence, as the modern day country of Nigeria. Nigeria today is famous for its wonderful art and music, and two of its exports are pepper and expertly woven striped cloth.

Kilwa

**A CITY OF TRADE KILWA**

Kilwa was once the most famous trading post in East Africa; it became a major trade center between the 1100s to the early 1500s.  This ancient settlement dates back to 800 AD. The site was important during the Shirazi dynasty which was founded by Ali Al-Hasan. From 11th Century to early 15th Ali Al-Hasan managed to create a powerful city (Kilwa). Under the rule of Ali al-Hasan, a Great Mosque was built, and trade connections to southern Africa and the near east (Arabian Peninsula, India, China) were established. Kilwa was one of the principal ports of trade on the Indian Ocean, trading gold, ivory, iron and coconuts from southern Africa, for cloth and jewelry from India, and porcelain from China. By the 13th Century Kilwa had become the most powerful city on the East African Coast, exercising political and trading domination around major trade route along the Indian Ocean.

**THE MERGING OF TWO CLUTURES:**

The contact between the East African coast and Arabia, Persia and even China, goes back long before Islam came in the 8th century. The Swahili is the name given to the coastal people of Kilwa. They share a common language and enjoy a city-based fusion of African and Arab culture. The Coast of East Africa has had a long history of trade, involving constant exchanges of ideas, style and products for well over two thousand years. Marriage between women of Africa and men of the Middle East created a rich Swahili culture, fusing urban and agricultural communities, rich in architecture, textiles, and food, as well as purchasing power.

**IBN BATUTA’S CONTACT WITH KILWA**

The outside world came to know Kilwa through a Moroccan intellectual travel {Ibn Batuta} who had visited Kilwa in 1331, and the Portuguese sailors who visited the place about 170 years after Batuta, these travelers are credited with much of the Kilwa's written history:-  about the life, wealth and powerful trade control on East African Coast. When Ibn Batuta, arrived at Kilwa, he was amazed with its beauty. He was quoted in saying Kilwa is, “one of the most beautiful of cities.”

**KILWA’S DECLINE**

The prosperity of the port city remained unharmed until the last decades of the 14th century, when turmoil over the ravages of the Black Death (A plague that wiped out 2/3 of the world’s population) took its toll on the international trade. By the 1500’s, Portuguese explorers visited Kilwa, and saw an opportunity for wealth and tried to can control of the Indian Ocean trade.

Great Zimbabwe “House of Stone”

**LASTING LEGACY**  
 The stone monument of Great Zimbabwe is the most famous stone building in southern Africa. It is thought to have been built over a long period, beginning in 1200 and ending in 1450. The ruins of these massive stone walls stretch across almost 1,800 acres of present-day southeastern Zimbabwe.

**GREAT ZIMBABWE’S PEOPLE**  
 Little is known about the Bantu-speaking people who built Great Zimbabwe or how their society was organized. The ruling elite appeared to have controlled the wealth through the management of cattle, which were part of the main diet at Great Zimbabwe. At its height, Great Zimbabwe is estimated to have had a population greater than 10,000, although the majority lived at some distance from the large stone buildings.

**BUILDING THE GREAT WALLS** Great Zimbabwe's most lasting and impressive remains are its stone walls. The building of these stone monuments began during the eleventh century A.D. by Bantu-speaking ancestors of the Shona. The construction of Great Zimbabwe’s stone wall took more than 300 years. The wall was constructed from granite blocks gathered from the exposed rock of the surrounding hills. Since this rock naturally splits into even slabs and can be broken into portable sizes, it provided a convenient and readily available building resource. All of Great Zimbabwe's walls were fitted without the use of mortar by laying stones one on top of the other, each layer slightly lower than the last to produce a stabilizing inward slope. The wall is as high as 36 feet and extends approximately 820 feet, making it the largest ancient structure south of the Sahara Desert.

The function of these stone walls, however, has often been misinterpreted. At first glance, these massive nonsupportive walls appear purely defensive. But scholars doubt they ever served a military purpose and have argued instead that cattle and people were valued above land. The walls are thought to have been a symbolic show of power, designed to set the royal families apart from the commoners; which means the larger the wall the more important, wealthy, powerful family.

**DECLINE**  
 There are several theories about the decline of Great Zimbabwe. One is environmental: that a combination of overgrazing and drought caused the soil on the Zimbabwe Plateau to become exhausted.  
The other explanation is that the people of Great Zimbabwe had to move in order to maximize their power over the gold trade network. They never controlled gold mines, but controlled the trade routes and taxed merchants heavily. By 1500 the site of Great Zimbabwe was abandoned.

Ethiopia

**BEFORE ETHIOPIA THERE WAS AXUM**

By the 400s BC, the Kingdom of Axum was established on the Red Sea coast and made itself known as a seafaring people active in the spice trade to India. Around 300 AD Axum became a Christian nation, and conquered the neighboring ancient kingdom of Kush. The Empire slowly declined until the last king was killed by the mysterious Queen Gudit around 960. Very little is known about the queen or her rule. Arab invasions did not destroy Axum. But changing climatic conditions and trade routes that moved away from the Red Sea forced people to abandon Axum. As a result, many people moved inland.

**A NEW RULE BEGINS: THE ZAGWE DYNASTY**

The last of Queen Gudit’s successors were overthrown by the Zagwe dynasty in 1137. The king of the Zagwe dynasty married a female descendant of the last Aksumite emperor to stake his claim as the rightful successor to the long dead empire. The capital was not far from modern day Lalibela. The Zagwe continued the Christianity of Aksum and constructed many magnificent churches.

**THE CHURCH’S OF LALIBELA**

Lalibela stands on soft red volcanic rock and was originally known as Roha. It was later renamed Lalibela when King Lalibela was credited with building the rock-hewn churches there in the twelfth century. Lalibela is now regarded as one of the greatest Ethiopian architectural wonders and is ranked the eighth most incredible historical site in the world. In Lalibela there are 11 churches cut out of solid red volcanic rock, which are constructed to represent Jerusalem. All the churches are still used as places of worship.

**SOLOMONID DYNASTY**

In 1270,the Zagwe dynasty was overthrown by a king claiming ancestry with the Aksumite emperors, this was the beginning of the Solomonid Dynasty. This dynasty reigned with only a few interruptions from 1270 until the late 20th century. It is under this dynasty that most of Ethiopia's modern history is formed. During this time, the empire conquered and incorporated virtually all the peoples within modern Ethiopia. They successfully fought off Italian, Arab and Turkish armies and made fruitful contacts with some European powers, especially the Portuguese with whom they allied in battle against the latter two aforementioned invaders.