The Coastal Countries

Reading Focus
- In what ways has location encouraged the development of trade in the coastal countries of West Africa?
- How have power struggles affected West African nations since independence?
- What relationship exists between the traditional cultures of West African peoples and their countries' economies?

Key Terms
- coup
- ancestor worship
- animism

Most countries along the coast of West Africa have been in political and economic turmoil since achieving independence.

Besides the five Sahel nations, West Africa contains eleven other countries. One, Cape Verde, is a small island nation. The others line the coast of West Africa, beginning in the west with Senegal and continuing along the Atlantic coast to Nigeria.

Location Leads to Trade
Because of their location, the coastal countries of West Africa have two advantages over those of the Sahel. First, they have a wetter climate. Adequate rainfall allows successful farming and the growth of valuable trees. Second, they have access to the sea. The natural harbors along the West African coastline offer great economic potential to the developing nations in this region. Freetown, in Sierra Leone, has one of the largest harbors in the world, though it does not rank as a leading port.

Global Trade Patterns The coast of West Africa attracted European traders from the 1400s. They came for gold, ivory, palm oil, and enslaved people to use as laborers. This coastal trade made trade across the Sahara less important. Eager for economic prosperity, coastal kingdoms fought each other for control of the new foreign trade.

Today the nations on the West African coast export only a few products and raw materials. Senegal, Gambia (GAM bee uh), and Guinea-Bissau (Gee nee bee SOW) export peanuts. Côte d'Ivoire (KOT dee VWAHR)—also called Ivory Coast—Ghana, Sierra Leone, and other nations largely depend upon the export of cocoa beans. Liberia exports iron ore.

Unequal Trade The economies of the West African countries suffer, in part, because their exports total less, in value, than their imports. Also, like many African countries, they are heavily in debt. Africa, as a whole, needs roughly 9 billion dollars every year just to pay the interest on its debts, and West Africa pays an enormous part of that.
Struggles for Power

European colonial powers ruled most of Africa until the 1960s. When the African countries gained their independence, their economies were often in very weak condition. Few new governments in Africa have been able to overcome or recover from these economic burdens.

Shifts in Power  When governments are weak, the army often steps in and takes over. Sometimes, different factions, or groups within the army, fight for power.

In Benin, six coups—sudden political takeovers—took place from 1963 to 1972. Major Ahmed Mathieu Kérékou (AKH muhd mat YUH ker uh KOO) stayed in control from 1972 until 1990. In that year, with Benin’s economy failing, Kérékou was faced with strikes and unrest. He then called for a new constitution that allowed others to share power. In 1991, a president was elected, and the military government resigned.

In some nations, setbacks occurred in the adoption of democracy. In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, the man who had ruled the nation for thirty years died and a new president was elected in 1995. Election laws and definitions of citizenship soon were changed, however, leading to growing conflict between different groups. The military overthrew the government in 1999. Although civilian leadership was reestablished by 2001, deep tensions remain between predominantly Christian people in the south and the mostly Muslim population of the north.

Liberia  Founded in 1822 by freed American slaves, Liberia became independent in 1847 under an American-style constitution. The country began its slide into chaos in 1980 with a bloody military coup. A decade of oppression and corruption led to a civil war, which raged well into the 1990s. Peacekeepers from other West African nations proved unable to halt the violence, and attempts at a lasting cease-fire failed. During the war, some 200,000 Liberians were killed, hundreds of thousands fled the country, and more than a million others were left homeless. As armed gangs patrolled the streets, one resident commented:

"If I had the slightest opportunity to leave this country now, to go anywhere, even a slimy refugee camp, it would be better because I can expect a stray bullet or a direct bullet at any time. Nobody can guarantee my security."

As the violence worsened, humanitarian agencies withdrew. Their earlier shipments of aid, in the form of food and medical supplies intended for civilians, had been stolen by soldiers. However, by 1996, the war had ended with democratic elections. The new president soon proved to be as oppressive as his predecessors, and fighting broke out once again. By 2003, rebel forces controlled most of the country. Upon the arrival of peacekeeping forces from other West African nations, Liberia’s president went into exile. Restoring normalcy to this devastated country will be a challenge for its new government.
Sierra Leone's Uncertain Future
Sierra Leone is another West African nation whose recent history has been bloody. After a series of coups and dictatorships over three decades, Sierra Leone held multiparty elections in 1996. Years of politically motivated violence seemed to be coming to an end. However, armed rebels overthrew the government in 1997. In response to the rebel actions, troops from eleven neighboring nations invaded and restored the elected leaders to power. The restoration was brief, though, and fighting resumed soon afterward.

In 2001, a cease-fire halted the violence and paved the way for national elections. However, Sierra Leone remained devastated by more than a decade of warfare. More than 50,000 people had been killed, and more than a third of the population was estimated to have been displaced. The banking system failed, and per capita GNP dropped to less than $500. The future of the nation's economy will depend upon the maintenance of peace and the continued receipt of financial aid from the international community.

People Power West Africans have learned that their governments alone often can do little to improve depressed economic conditions. One writer described a positive consequence of this realization:

“There are signs that some Africans already are taking matters into their own hands. As rural people have become disillusioned [disappointed] with outsiders and with their own governments, millions of them have begun grass-roots efforts . . . to organize local resources.”

The key to this new economic approach is its grass-roots beginnings. Grass roots means that the effort begins with ordinary citizens. In West Africa, increasingly, it is women who make grass-roots efforts work.

Cultural Roles
Economic Opportunities Many of the women of West African countries, just as in the rest of the continent, are front-line troops in a hard-fought battle: they grow crops in the war against hunger. In many West African countries women are establishing agricultural cooperatives to improve the economic conditions of their villages. In the village of Malon in Sierra Leone, more than 200 women work together to grow
more crops. Women also run an important part of the economy—the markets where food is bought and sold. As Africa modernizes, women are constantly expanding their traditional roles and are becoming owners of small businesses. Children are also valuable workers in West African countries, helping to grow and harvest crops.

**Religion** Children are important for another reason, as can be seen in the case of the Asante (ah SAHN tay), a group of people who live in southern Ghana. The Asante, like many African peoples, believe that if their children continue to respect and honor them after death, they themselves will live on in the spirit world. An African chief once described his people as “a vast family, of which many are dead, few are living, and countless members are unborn.” Honoring the spirits of the dead is called **ancestor worship**.

Ancestor worship is one aspect of the Asante religion; another is **animism**. According to this belief, ordinary things of nature—the sky, rivers, trees—all contain gods or spirits.

**Population Growth** In Africa, as in other places, social custom, religious beliefs, and economic conditions sometimes translate into large families and a fast-growing population. The birthrate in Ghana—29 per 1,000 population—is much higher than the average birthrate for the world. In fact, the population of Africa is growing faster than populations anywhere else on earth.

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**SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT**

1. **Key Terms** Define (a) coup, (b) ancestor worship, (c) animism.

2. **Global Trade Patterns** How have nations along West Africa’s coast taken advantage of their location over the centuries?

3. **Government and Citizenship** How have coups played a part in the political history of this region?

4. **Economic Systems** What new economic practice is finding success in West Africa?

5. **Critical Thinking** Making Comparisons Compare women’s roles in Africa with women’s roles in the United States.

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**Activity**

**Making a Line Graph** Choose one of the countries discussed in this section. Review the information about that country’s history following its independence, and do more research on your own. Using your findings, create a line graph that expresses that country’s movement toward democracy, beginning with its independence and extending to the most recent information you can find. Annotate your graph with notes that explain trends and any sudden “ups” and “downs” in the line.