

The Mystery of Africa

In East Africa, on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, a group of teenagers has just come out of their mountain school. The sun shines brightly. The young people look up to see the sunshine sparkles off of the snow-covered peaks far above them.

One of the students is carrying a history textbook. The textbook was written by a British historian. Before 1960, Britain ruled this part of Africa.

The students are laughing at something they have just read in the textbook. The book says that Mount Kilimanjaro was “discovered” in 1847 by a German explorer. The students laughed when they read this. They knew that their ancestor had lived on the mountain for many centuries before the Germans came! “How can they say that the mountain was discovered in 1847?” one student asked her teacher. “We were here when they arrived!”

The Mystery of Africa The truth is that Westerners knew very little about the interior of Africa until the nineteenth century. Until then, Africa was a “dark continent,” a place of mystery. Some Westerners had read about Africa in books. But what they had read was often a mixture of fact and fantasy. One well-known book had a report from a group of Roman explorers who traveled south from Egypt around 77 CE. The book described human beings with strange features – like monsters. Some African people, said the book, had no noses, and others had no tongues. And some, the book said, had no nostrils for breathing. It is easy for us to laugh at such wild tales. In earlier times, however, many Westerners at least half believed them.

Why did Westerners know so little about Africa until the twentieth century? It is because most of the continent was isolated

from the outside world. Explorers who tried to learn about Africa faced many challenges. That was mainly because of Africa’s geography.

For one thing, Africa’s coastline is mostly straight. Sailors find few natural harbors where they feel safe in anchoring their ships. What’s more, waterfalls and other hazards block all of Africa’s main rivers. Boats could get only so far inland.

Africa does contain many possible land routes that were used for centuries. For example, major trade routes run from western and central Africa to western Asia and the lands along the Mediterranean Sea. However, all of those routes cross the world’s largest desert, the Sahara. Travel across the hot, dry Sahara is very difficult.

For these and other reasons, Westerners remained ignorant of Africa for centuries. They made contact only with groups who lived along Africa’s coasts. From those groups, Westerners kidnapped people to be sold into slavery. They also engaged in limited trade in other goods, such as gold. Such contacts began during the fifteenth century, but few Westerners knew or cared much about Africa’s long and complex past. As late as the 1930s, many history books barely mentioned the continent.

Today we know much more. We know that wealth trading empires and complex governments existed in Africa as far back as the time of the Egyptian pharaohs. And, we have found signs that the human race itself may have begun in Africa.

In this unit, you will learn of the people who were a part of Africa’s early history. In Africa, as you will also learn about in the Americas, there were many different groups. Each had its own traditions and ways of living.