

Summary: Economies and Cultures

Economies of Western and Central Africa

Most African countries once had traditional economies. They followed old customs of trading goods. European governments introduced the market economy, in which goods are bought and sold. Government-controlled economies were common after independence. Today, many African countries are moving back to market economies.

Many people in Western and Central Africa practice subsistence farming. They grow food mainly to feed their own families. In the colonial period, large plantations were started. Today, coastal West African countries export cash crops such as coffee, bananas, pineapples, and peanuts. Central African countries produce coffee, rubber, and cotton. While most people in Western and Central Africa are farmers, some make items with metal, leather, or wood. Others are entertainers and musicians.

Africa has many types of minerals. Western and Central Africa export diamonds, gold, oil, and uranium. Sometimes Africa's mineral wealth is used to pay for wars. During Angola's civil war, money from oil was used to buy weapons. Diamonds were traded for guns.

Ways of Life

In Western and Central Africa, hundreds of ethnic groups speak more than 1,000 languages. People practice many different religions.

Most Africans live in villages. But many are moving to large, crowded cities. City living has strained traditional family life and culture. Society in Western and Central Africa is based on extended families that include children, parents, grandparents, and other relatives. People work and share free time with family members. In many African societies, older people have higher status than younger people. Because age is so important, a rite of passage marks the change from one stage of life to another. However, this tradition is dying out in parts of Africa. Some young people now have a higher status because of skills that are highly valued in cities, such as speaking a European language.

Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

subsistence farming *noun*, growing food mainly to feed one's own family

cash crop *noun*, a crop grown only for sale

rite of passage *noun*, a special ceremony that marks the transition from one stage of life to another

After You Read

REVIEW What is significant about the rite of passage in the life of young men and women? Highlight the two sentences that explain why the rite of passage is significant.

REVIEW What aspects of city life do you think would put new strains on Africans from small villages? Circle the paragraph that helps explain why city living has strained traditional family life and culture.