

The First Farmers in Africa, the Cradle of Humanity

By David Baker, Big History Project, adapted by Newsela on 06.28.16

Word Count **847**



TOP: Rectangular fields clustered around a water well on a bank of the Niger River, near Gao, Mali. MIDDLE: Map of the continent of Africa. BOTTOM: Sorghum and millet bunches, annual grasses grown as grain and animal fodder. Images: Photo: Big History Project

Modern humans evolved and appeared first in Africa, which is why it is called the Cradle of Humanity. Still, people in the part of Africa below the Sahara Desert began farming later than in other places.

Agriculture: Why wasn't Africa first?

Our ancestors evolved in Africa over millions of years. *Homo sapiens* (modern humans) have only existed for about 200,000 to 250,000 years.

Humans first left Africa about 65,000 years ago. But if humans evolved in sub-Saharan Africa, why didn't farming begin there?

The Fertile Crescent was the first region in the world to develop agriculture in about 9000 BCE. China followed in 7000 BCE. Egypt was the first part of Africa to develop agriculture.

All of Africa below the Sahara continued hunting and gathering until about 3000 BCE. Why did sub-Saharan Africa trail behind the Fertile Crescent by 6,000 years?

Was there a disaster that wiped out farming in Africa? Was there a problem in sharing farming knowledge? Why didn't farms, cities, and empires, first appear in Africa? The continent is, after all, the home of our species.

Living off the land

Actually, Africa developed agriculture a little later because it was the home of our species.

We humans evolved as foragers. We hunted and gathered what we needed. Over thousands of years, humans in Africa learned to live off the land.

In fact, hunting and gathering was the best way of life for many humans for a long time.

Early farming was inefficient and difficult. It took 9.5 hours of farming each day to survive. Foragers needed just 6 hours to gather food.

Farming had other negatives for early humans. Settling down led to more disease and worse health. Early farmers were at the mercy of the climate and of natural disasters.

In the Kalahari Desert of Southwest Africa, people hunted and gathered. They didn't accept farming for a long time. At the time, farming was more difficult and less healthy than foraging.

Also, think about the geography of Africa. It is a large and beautiful continent, but it also contains many challenging environments.

The huge Sahara Desert is not an easy place to farm. The Sahara also cut off communication with Eurasia. People living south of the Sahara had to invent farming on their own. That is what happened in West Africa.

Africa also has thick forests and jungles. These are not easy places to start a farm.

In Africa, people lived a mobile life. They moved from place to place and lived off the land. People in sub-Saharan Africa did not need to settle down and start farming.

West Africa's early farmers

Farming came first to West Africa. People there developed it on their own in about 3000 BCE. Historians think the West Africans were originally growing food for cattle, not for humans.

The West Africans were nomads who moved around a lot. Cattle were their main food source.

From 3000 to 1000 BCE, farming spread across West Africa. These early farmers grew millet and sorghum, types of grains. Later, farmers grew rice, root vegetables, yams, and fruits.

West Africans did not learn to farm from other people. They developed it on their own. In fact, West Africa started farming around the same time as the Americas did. Many other parts of the world still had not begun farming at that time.

The spread of African agriculture



Bunches of sorghum (bottom) and pearl millet (top right), annual grasses grown as grain in the Sahel Desert, Mali, and West Africa.

Many people left West Africa around 1000 BCE. The Bantu people were leaving. They spread farming across Africa. The Bantu took farming to East Africa. Around this time, Africans began using iron to make weapons and tools.

Other Bantu headed south. They reached the Congo area of Central Africa by 500 BCE. The Bantu reach the southern tip of Africa by 500 CE. Now, farming had spread to all of Africa.

Farming allowed populations to grow across sub-Saharan Africa.

In 500 BCE, sub-Saharan Africa had an estimated population of 7 million. Most people still hunted and gathered. They needed a lot of space.

One thousand years later, there were 20 million people in sub-Saharan Africa.

The good and the bad

People in sub-Saharan Africa successfully hunted and gathered for a very long time. At the same time, West Africa was one of the first regions of the world to begin farming. Only the Fertile Crescent and East Asia started sooner.

It took about 2,000 years for farming to spread to the rest of Africa. This late start means parts of Africa developed cities and complex civilizations later.

Some regions of Africa suffered when they met European cultures who had begun farming earlier. Europeans were more easily able to conquer them.

However, some parts of Africa benefited from hunting and gathering.

The hunter-gatherers avoided the downsides of a complex society for a long time. There were not strict lines dividing rich and poor. There were no kings or emperors.

It made sense for people to keep hunting and gathering for as long as they could.

Today, Africa faces many challenges. Its success concerns the whole world, because we are all connected in a global network.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from "Living off the land."

We humans evolved as foragers. We hunted and gathered what we needed. Over thousands of years, humans in Africa learned to live off the land.

In fact, hunting and gathering was the best way of life for many humans for a long time.

Based on the selection above, which of these statements is TRUE?

- (A) Foraging for food took a lot of time and effort.
- (B) Foraging for food worked well for early humans.
- (C) Early humans wanted to learn to farm.
- (D) Early humans needed to eat less than humans today.

- 2 Read the section "The spread of African agriculture."

Which sentence from the section shows a way that farming affected people in Africa?

- (A) The Bantu took farming to East Africa.
- (B) Now, farming had spread to all of Africa.
- (C) Farming allowed populations to grow across sub-Saharan Africa.
- (D) Most people still hunted and gathered.

- 3 Read the section "The good and the bad."

What was one benefit to being a hunter-gatherer instead of a farmer?

- (A) People in hunter-gatherer societies were more connected to other groups.
- (B) People in hunter-gatherer societies had more money and food.
- (C) People in hunter-gatherer societies were more similar to European cultures.
- (D) People in hunter-gatherer societies were more equal to each other.

- 4 Read the section "Living off the land."

What was one reason why people in Africa took longer to develop farming?

- (A) They did not have enough space to farm.
- (B) The land was difficult to farm.
- (C) They did not know which crops to grow.
- (D) The land belonged to other groups.