

An Ancient Land and People

More than three times the size of the U.S. mainland, the African continent has historically encompassed a vast range of peoples and environmental conditions. Most of the continent lies within the tropics, in what environmental historians and climatologists call the *intertropical convergence zone*. Ecological perspectives, meaning insight into the ways people adapt to their changing environment, call attention to the influence of climate and other environmental factors over many centuries. Only the northern and southern tips of Africa have a moderate, Mediterranean climate. In West Africa, from which the majority of persons in the Atlantic slave trade came, various ecological zones are distinguishable, so that (moving from north to south) the Sahara produced salt; the Sahel, livestock; the Savannah, cereals; and the forest region, gold and kola. This ecological diversity affected social development in meaningful ways. Domesticated cattle, for example, spread along regions that were free of the tsetse fly—the insect that spreads trypanosomiasis, which kills cattle. The development of cattle keeping and other forms of pastoralism occurred then in the savannah grasslands in the southern Sahara and the plateaus of eastern and Southern Africa.