

Unit 1 Introduction



OUT OF AFRICA

Something in Africa invites us all to its embrace. If you were to visit this continent, you too would feel—in some subtle, deep-rooted sense—that you were at home.

That is because you have already been to Africa. At least a part of you has.

Inside human cells, there is genetic material, called DNA, which determines individual hereditary characteristics. DNA exists both within the nucleus and outside the nucleus in tiny organelles called **mitochondria**. Mitochondrial DNA is passed down solely from mothers to their children. By studying the mitochondrial DNA of human beings, scientists have figured out that every person on the planet is descended from a single woman who lived somewhere on the vast continent of Africa about 200,000 years ago. Every person now alive, therefore, is distantly related. This is a well-established scientific fact. Scientists call the mother from whom all people descended **Mitochondrial Eve**.



Perhaps she lived in East Africa, in modern-day Tanzania, which is home to majestic Mount Kilimanjaro, as well as to Olduvai Gorge, where three-million-year-old bones of prehistoric ancestors were unearthed in the 1970s.

Perhaps her children's children first ventured from the ancestral home, across the grassy savanna teeming with wildlife, to the rainforests of West Africa. Some, we know, traveled up the Nile River Valley and then onward in all directions, crossing rivers, seas, and oceans. Mitochondrial Eve's descendants made their own families, whose children and children's children formed into tribes, villages, nations, and empires.



Their hands built all the nations of the earth, and their tongues invented all of its languages. They waged war and learned to make peace. They made music, and they danced. They learned to follow the stars, they established trade routes, and they mapped the earth. They became queens and kings, prophets and philosophers, liberators and enslavers, heroes and villains, explorers, traders, conquerors, builders, composers, painters, and poets. They became everyone who ever lived.

They became *you*.

If you were to travel over the whole of Africa, you would hear as many as 2,000 languages spoken by literally thousands of ethnic groups, including the Ashanti, Berbers, Wolof, Senufo, Yoruba, Zulu, Pygmies, Maasai, Fulani, Bushmen, and Bambara. Most of these peoples do not have a written history or literary record that goes back more than a



century or two. However, their oral stories and histories may go all the way back to the dawn of human time. Certainly, African (and African-American) folklore and mythology have deep roots in the past. Both were preserved thanks to the **oral tradition**, through which information, stories, poems, and songs were passed verbally from one generation to the next, not as books are passed, not with a single telling or forced memorization, but by steady, consistent retelling and repetition, the addition of colorful details and the loss of others, day by day, story by story, over centuries and millennia.

That which is entrusted to the oral tradition of a culture becomes second nature to the people of that culture. Such material endures as long as someone is willing to tell and someone else is ready to listen.

For many Africans, however, the natural passage of stories from one generation to the next was brutally and utterly disrupted in the early 1500s with the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. (See the Historical Background: Slavery and the Slave Trade on page 88.) Enslaved Africans took little in the way of possessions to the New World, but they had untold riches stored in their memories. Africans who were enslaved in the Americas never lost their desire to tell stories, to make music, to sing, and to dance as a way to ease their troubles, share with loved ones, and cement the bonds of community. Often, they were willing to risk everything just to make music and to worship as they pleased. In most cases, enslaved Africans were forbidden to practice their native religions or even to speak in their native tongues. This made it all the more difficult for them to preserve their heritage. Still, elements of the African story tradition survived. Even after an exhausting day's labor, there was still time, sometimes, for telling stories.

And with the telling of these stories, a new story began. African tales,

proverbs, and poems were gradually adapted to the realities of life in America. In recent decades, at last, these stories have appeared in written form. And what wonderful stories they are! The ancient stories will last for as long as there are stories to be told.

