

# AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONS: THE REAL WAKANDAS



## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Why do many Americans have knowledge gaps when it comes to African history? Why is it important to learn about early African civilizations?



## OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Consider the meaning of Eurocentrism and its impact, specifically as it relates to knowledge of African history.
- Explore the significance of the film *Black Panther*, and the actual civilizations that influenced the film's setting and story.
- Research one early African civilization, using primary and secondary sources of information.
- Challenge societal perceptions of African history as less important or significant than the history of Western civilizations.



## LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



## TIME NEEDED

At least 90 minutes



## MATERIALS

- AV equipment to project an article
- *Where is "Wakanda"?* handout (one per student)
- *Findings: A Real "Wakanda"* handout (one per student)
- *African Civilizations: Primary and Secondary Sources* handout (one per student)



## VOCABULARY

Aksum (also Axum)	eurocentrism	Mali
civilization	Ghana	racism
colonize/colonialism	Great Zimbabwe	stereotype
empire	kingdom	

# Procedures

## PART 1

### From Fiction to Historical Inquiry (40 mins.)

- 1** Project or distribute the article “Weary professors give up, concede that Africa is a country”: <http://wapo.st/2N31H1L>. Have students read it independently or read together as a class. Make sure students understand that the article is satirical. Discuss it using some of the following questions:
  - What problem do the authors use humor to expose?
  - Why do so many people mistakenly think that Africa is a country? Why is it problematic to think of “Africa’s thousands of cultural groups” as one country?
  - What reasons do the authors point to for this lack of awareness? [They note “*poorly-informed journalism*” and “*Eurocentric educational curricula.*”] What is Eurocentrism and how does it explain why westerners might be unfamiliar with African culture and history?
  - What stereotypes or biases about Africa might contribute to knowledge gaps about this region?
  - What African cultural groups or historic civilizations do you know about? Do you think you have any knowledge gaps in this area? Explain.
  
- 2** Ask students if they have seen the film *Black Panther*. Explain that the film’s setting is the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda, and play the trailer if students are unfamiliar with it: <http://n.pr/3oNZmpC>. Discuss why this film has been so meaningful to Black Americans. Highlight the following ideas:
  - In the film, Black people are depicted as powerful and in charge of their own destiny, not as victims.

- Wakanda is positioned as the only African country that was never colonized; the film imagines a society not tainted by racism and colonialism.
- It presents “blackness as a thing with meaning and with lineage, with value and place.”<sup>1</sup>

**3** Point out that following the film’s release, internet searches for Wakanda soared, indicating that many people think Wakanda is a real place and highlighting knowledge gaps about actual African history and geography. Ask students if they think Wakanda is based on a real society or reveals anything about actual African civilizations.

**4** Distribute copies of the handout *Where is Wakanda?*, and provide students with access to a modern map of Africa. In pairs or small groups, have them use the map and information on the handout to identify actual nations and historic civilizations that may have been the influences for Wakanda. After the exercise, discuss the following:

- What did you learn about African countries, geography or history that you did not know before?
- What surprised you about some of the possible influences behind Wakanda and *Black Panther*?
- Did this exercise pique your curiosity about African history or culture? What more do you want to learn?

## PART 2

### The Real Deal—African Kingdoms (time will vary)

**5** Tell students they will research one early African civilization—a real Wakanda—in order to better understand the vibrant and complex societies that existed prior to European colonization. Divide the class into small research teams and assign each one of the following kingdoms: Aksum (also Axum), Ghana, Mali and Great Zimbabwe. (Depending on class size, more than one group may be assigned to each kingdom.)

<sup>1</sup> Carvell Wallace, "Why 'Black Panther' Is a Defining Moment for Black America," *New York Times*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/magazine/why-black-panther-is-a-defining-moment-for-black-america.html>.

**6** Distribute the handout *Findings: A Real Wakanda*, and review the research questions students will be using to guide their investigation. Distribute the handout *African Civilizations: Primary and Secondary Sources*, which provides links to relevant websites. Direct groups to select at least one primary and one secondary source for their investigation. Suggest that students read secondary sources first, as they provide a broad overview of the civilizations, and then proceed to the more-focused primary sources. Provide groups with access to laptops or tablets and allow them adequate time to conduct their research.

**7** If time allows, have students share their findings in small groups comprised of peers who investigated different civilizations. Have them select one category from the *Findings: A Real Wakanda* handout and share a key fact or insight.

**8** Post the following quote from British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, written in 1963:

*Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europe in Africa. The rest is largely darkness.*<sup>2</sup>

Ask students to react to this quote (in writing or via discussion) using the following prompt: Based on your research, how would you respond to Professor Trevor-Roper? Have students cite evidence from their investigation to support their ideas.

**9** Conclude the lesson by discussing some of the questions on the next page.

#### NOTE

If students do not have internet access or require less challenging reading material, the middle school lesson in this unit, *Powerful African Kingdoms*, contains handouts on the following kingdoms that can be used for this research investigation: Kush, Aksum (also Axum), Mali and Great Zimbabwe.

<sup>2</sup> Wheatcroft, Geoffrey, "Unscrambling Africa," *New York Times*, May 17, 1992. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/17/books/unscrambling-africa.html>.

# Discussion Questions

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + BBC Sounds. "The Story of Africa." <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/p03njin4f>.
- + CMS Curriculum Companion. "Africa, 400 A.D./C.E.–1500s." <https://www.socialstudiescms.com/africa>.
- + Du Toit, Melanie. "9 Ancient African Kingdoms You Should Know About." Rhino Africa, March 27, 2018. <https://blog.rhinoafrica.com/2018/03/27/9-ancient-african-kingdoms>.
- + McDow, Thomas F. "Searching for Wakanda: The African Roots of the Black Panther Story." Origins. <http://origins.osu.edu/print/5324>.
- + NPR/WNYC. "Black Panther's Mythical Home May Not Be So Mythical After All." February 10, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/02/10/583497786/black-panthers-mythical-home-may-not-be-so-mythical-after-all>.
- + PBS. "Africa's Great Civilizations." <http://to.pbs.org/3sgXise>.

1

What stood out or surprised you about the African kingdom you investigated? What made it a complex civilization and a global power?

2

Had you learned about any of these civilizations prior to this lesson? If so, what were your sources of knowledge? If not, what do you think is responsible for knowledge gaps related to African history?

3

Why is it important to learn about African history?

4

What examples of Eurocentrism have you noticed, for example, in schools, media, politics, etc.? How do Eurocentric points of view impact individuals and the larger society?

5

What would you say to somebody who claims that Africa has contributed less to the world than the United States or European nations?

## Lesson Extensions

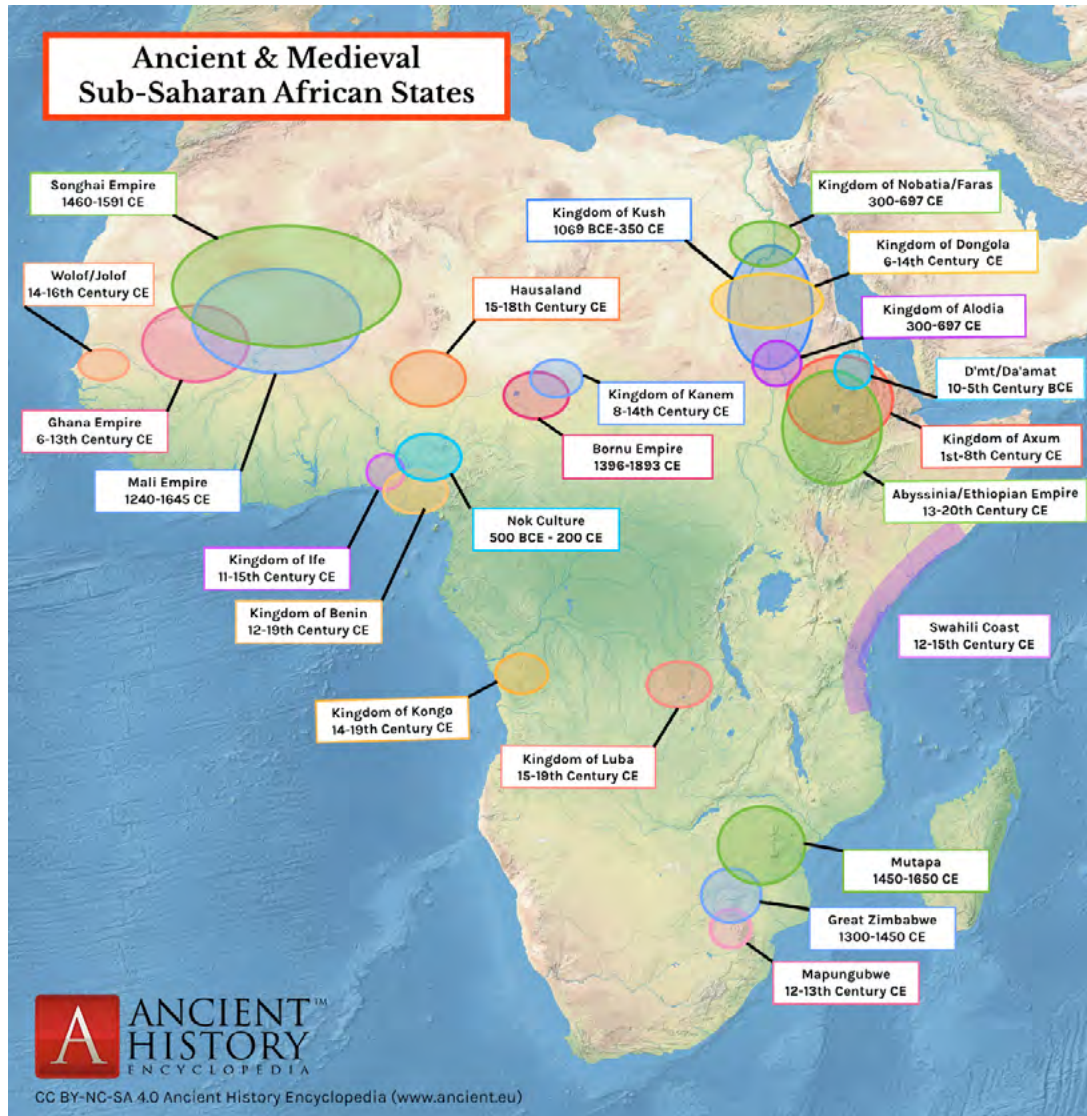
- Assign students to continue their learning about early African civilizations by researching a kingdom they have not yet investigated. Have students create a multimedia presentation summarizing their key findings.
- Assign students to investigate communities with African populations in their own town, city or state. Have them identify the nations represented, research at least one of those countries or cultures and, if possible, interview someone from the community about their background and experiences.
- Challenge students to examine their history textbooks and evaluate how much "coverage" is devoted to African history and societies as compared to other regions.
- Have students conduct a reader's theater performance of *Sundiata, Lion King of Mali*, about the first king of the ancient empire of Mali: <https://orias.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/sundiata-script.pdf>.



# Where is Wakanda?



Using the information below and a modern map of Africa, mark the possible locations of fictional Wakanda on this map of early African civilizations. Which ancient kingdoms may have been an inspiration for Wakanda?



- A 2008 Marvel series locates Wakanda on the north side of Lake Turkana, near the border of Kenya and Ethiopia. Ethiopia, which remained independent during the period of African colonization, may have been an influence.
- The film's director was influenced by the country Lesotho, which also avoided the worst of colonialism.
- A *Black Panther* writer places Wakanda on the western shore of Lake Victoria, near the border of Uganda and Tanzania. The Tanzanian city of Bukoba could be a real-life parallel to the Wakandan capital, Birnin Zana.
- In 2016's *Captain America*, Wakandans speak in Xhosa, a common language in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Therefore, the nations of southern Africa may have been an influence.
- The Democratic Republic of the Congo was the site of struggle over uranium in the 1960s and is the source of coltan today, a valuable metal used in technology products. Since a plot line in *Black Panther* involves western greed and a desire for African resources, Congo's history may have influenced Wakanda's identity.

MAP SOURCE: Cartwright, Mark. *Map of Ancient & Medieval Sub-Saharan African States*. Ancient History Encyclopedia. April 12, 2019. Accessed January 12, 2021. <https://www.ancient.eu/image/10453/map-of-ancient--medieval-sub-saharan-african-state>.



# Findings: A Real Wakanda

Conduct a close review of at least one primary and one secondary source of information for your assigned civilization. Record notes under each category below, citing evidence from sources where relevant.

**NAME AND APPROXIMATE DATES OF KINGDOM:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## 1 Where was your “Wakanda?”

*Where in Africa was your assigned kingdom located? What are the corresponding modern countries? What geographical features played an important role in the development of the kingdom?*

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## 2 What was your kingdom’s “vibranium” (a critical natural resource in Black Panther)?

*What natural resources or other important products were developed by the kingdom for trade and enrichment? How did the kingdom become economically and politically powerful?*

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## 3 How was the kingdom organized?

*How was it governed? Were there different classes? What types of art or culture were produced? How did ordinary people participate in the society?*



# Findings: A Real Wakanda (continued)

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**4 What contact did the kingdom have with outsiders? How did it spread its influence?**

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**5 When and how did the kingdom decline?**

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**6 Who is the Stan Lee or Jack Kirby (the creators of Black Panther) of your primary source?**

*What kind of document or artifact is this? Who is the creator? Is the point of view from inside or outside the civilization? Is the perspective objective or biased, and how?*

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**7 Additional Notes**