History

THE DAWN OF MANKIND
East Africa has one of the longest documented human histories of any region in the world. Ancient hominid (human-like) skulls and footprints, some over three million years old, have been found at various sites in the region, including at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania and Lake Turkana in Kenya. Although similarly ancient traces have also been found elsewhere on the continent, the East African section of the Great Rift Valley is popularly considered the ‘cradle of humanity’.

By about one million years ago, these early ancestors had come to resemble modern humans, and had spread well beyond East Africa, including as far as Europe and Asia. Roughly 100,000 years ago, and possibly earlier, *homo sapiens* – modern man – had arrived on the scene.

The earliest evidence of modern-day East Africans dates to around 10,000 years ago, when much of the region was home to Khoisan-speaking hunter-gatherer communities. On the western fringes of East Africa, including parts of the area that is now Rwanda and Burundi, there were also small populations of various so-called Pygmy groups.

THE GREAT MIGRATIONS
Beginning between 3000 and 5000 years ago, a series of migrations began that were to indelibly shape the face of East Africa. Cushitic- and Nilotic-speaking peoples from the north and Bantu-speakers from the west converged on the Khoisan and other peoples already in the area, creating over the centuries the rich tribal mosaic that is East Africa today.

The first to arrive were Cushitic-speaking farmers and cattle herders who made their way to the region from present-day Ethiopia, and settled both inland and along the coast. They moved mostly in small family groups, and brought with them traditions that are still practiced by their descendants, including the Iraqw around Tanzania’s Lake Manyara and the Gabbra and Rendille in northern Kenya.

The next major influx began around 1000 BC when Bantu-speaking peoples from West Africa’s Niger Delta area began moving eastwards, arriving in East Africa around the 1st century BC. Thanks to their advanced agricultural skills and knowledge of ironworking and steel production – which gave them a great advantage in cultivating land and establishing settlements – these Bantu-speakers were able to absorb many of the Cushitic- and Khoisan-speakers who were already in the region, as well as the Pygmy populations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline Event</th>
<th>c 3.5 million BC</th>
<th>c 100 BC</th>
<th>c 750 – 1200 AD</th>
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<td>Fossils found at Kenya’s Lake Turkana and at Laetoli, Tanzania show that hominid (human-like) creatures were wandering around the East African plains over three million years ago.</td>
<td>The first Bantu-speakers arrive in the region, part of a series of great population migrations that shaped the face of East Africa as it is today.</td>
<td>Islam reaches East Africa and Swahili civilisation is born. Settlements are established at Lamu, Gede, Kilwa and elsewhere along the coast.</td>
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See www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/humans/humankind/d.html for an overview of human evolution in East Africa.

Zamani – A Survey of East African History, edited by renowned Kenyan historian BA Ogot with JA Kieran, is a classic introduction to the region’s pre-colonial and colonial history from an African perspective.
around the Great Lakes. Soon, they became East Africa’s most populous ethnolinguistic family – a status which they continue to hold today.

A final wave of migration began somewhat later when smaller groups of Nilotic peoples began to arrive in East Africa from what is now southern Sudan. This influx continued through to the 18th century, with the main movements taking place in the 15th and 16th centuries. Most of these Nilotic peoples – whose descendants include the present-day Maasai and Turkana – were pastoralists, and many settled in the less fertile areas of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania where their large herds would have sufficient grazing space.

Today, the population diversity resulting from these migrations is one of the most fascinating aspects of travel in East Africa.

**MONSOON WINDS**

As these migrations were taking place in the interior, coastal areas were being shaped by far different influences. Azania, as the East African coast was known to the ancient Greeks, was an important trading post as early as 400 BC, and had likely been inhabited even before then by small groups of Cushitic peoples, and by Bantu-speakers. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a navigator’s guide written in the 1st century AD, mentions Raphta as the southernmost trading port. Although its location remains a mystery, it is believed to have been somewhere along the Kenyan or Tanzanian coast, possibly on the mainland opposite Manda or Paté Islands (north of Lamu), or further south near the Pangani or Rufiji estuaries.

Trade seems to have grown steadily throughout the early part of the first millennium. Permanent settlements were established as traders, first from the Mediterranean and later from Arabia and Persia, came ashore on the winds of the monsoon and began to intermix with the indigenous peoples, gradually

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**SWAHILI**

The word ‘Swahili’ (‘of the coast’, from the Arabic word *sāhil*) refers both to the Swahili language, as well as to the Islamic culture of the peoples inhabiting the East African coast from Mogadishu (Somalia) in the north down to Mozambique in the south. Both language and culture are a rich mixture of Bantu, Arabic, Persian and Asian influences.

Although Swahili culture began to develop in the early part of the first millennium AD, it was not until the 18th century, with the ascendancy of the Omani Arabs on Zanzibar, that it came into its own. Swahili’s role as a *lingua franca* was solidified as it spread throughout East and Central Africa along the great trade caravan routes. European missionaries and explorers soon adopted the language as their main means of communicating with locals. In the second half of the 19th century, missionaries, notably the German Johan Ludwig Krapf, also began applying the Roman alphabet. Prior to this, Swahili had been written exclusively in Arabic script.