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A History of Burkina Faso

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Introduction

Burkina Faso, situated at the heart of West Africa, is a country whose past is marked by resilience, complexity, and transformation. Bordered by six nations and landlocked in the semi-arid Sahel region, Burkina Faso has been both a crossroads of peoples and cultures and a stage for dramatic historical shifts. The nation's trajectory—from ancient hunter-gatherer societies to powerful kingdoms, colonial subjugation, revolutions, and persistent quests for sovereignty—offers a profound case study of human striving in the face of adversity.

This book seeks to explore the multifaceted history of Burkina Faso, delving into the earliest archaeological evidence that points to its role as a cradle of civilization in West Africa. Millennia before European contact, the peoples who inhabited the region developed complex ways of life, including innovative agricultural and metallurgical practices. The rise of the Mossi kingdoms in the 11th century marked the formation of enduring political and cultural structures, whose legacies echo in the country's present-day society.

The colonial era, ushered in by the Scramble for Africa, brought profound change and upheaval to Burkina Faso. French conquest in the late nineteenth century was met with fierce resistance from local populations and sparked new forms of identity and opposition. Colonial policies, boundary shifts, and economic exploitation left enduring imprints on society, complicating the path to self-determination and modern statehood.

Burkina Faso's post-independence experience is a story of both turbulence and determination. The young nation has endured repeated cycles of political instability, marked by military coups, social unrest, and experiments in governance. From the early attempts at forging unity under Maurice Yaméogo to the revolutionary vision of Thomas Sankara, and the lengthy, controversial tenure of Blaise Compaoré, each era has brought its own challenges and hopes.

In recent years, Burkina Faso has grappled with new threats, including the rise of violent extremism, ongoing political uncertainty, and the quest for economic and social renewal. Despite these hardships, the country's people have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for resistance and reinvention. Their pursuit of dignity, justice, and a meaningful national identity continues to shape the fabric of Burkina Faso today.

Through examining the details of Burkina Faso's past, this book aims not only to recount the major events and personalities that have shaped the nation, but also to illuminate the resilience at the heart of its history. Ultimately, the journey of Burkina

Faso is one of a people striving, through adversity and change, to define their place in the world—a story that resonates far beyond its borders.

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CHAPTER ONE: Ancient Beginnings: Early Inhabitants of the Volta Basin

Long before written records chronicled the rise and fall of kingdoms or the arrival of foreign powers, the land that would one day be known as Burkina Faso was home to a diverse array of peoples whose lives unfolded across vast stretches of time. Their existence is not etched in royal decrees or traveler's tales, but in the silent language of stones, tools, pottery, and the remnants of ancient hearths buried deep beneath the soil. This deep history, often invisible to the casual observer, forms the bedrock upon which all subsequent Burkinabè history is built.

Exploring these ancient beginnings requires the patient work of archaeologists, piecing together fragments from a distant past. What they uncover reveals that the story of human habitation in this region extends back far into prehistory, tracing the paths of hunter-gatherer groups who roamed the landscapes of the Volta basin many millennia ago. These early peoples were intimately connected to their environment, relying on the natural world for sustenance.

Evidence unearthed at various sites across the country points to human activity occurring as early as 14,000 years before the common era. Imagine the scene: small bands of nomadic peoples navigating a landscape perhaps quite different from today, following game, collecting wild plants, and adapting to the changing seasons. Their tools, likely made of stone, bone, and wood, were crafted for the essential tasks of survival in a challenging environment.

These early inhabitants were not merely surviving; they were developing skills and knowledge passed down through generations. They understood the rhythms of nature, the habits of animals, and the properties of plants. Their social structures, though we can only speculate, would have been vital for cooperation, sharing resources, and teaching the young the ways of the world.

Over thousands of years, a slow but profound transformation began to take place across parts of Africa, including the Volta basin. Humans started to transition from a purely nomadic lifestyle to one that involved more settled patterns of existence. This shift was inextricably linked to the development of new ways of interacting with the natural world.

The great turning point, known as the Neolithic Revolution in other contexts, involved the domestication of plants and animals. While the precise timeline and details vary across different regions, the evidence suggests that between roughly 3600 and 2600

years before the common era, agricultural settlements began to take root in the areas now part of Burkina Faso.

The decision to cultivate crops and raise livestock was revolutionary. It meant that communities could stay in one place for longer periods, leading to the establishment of more permanent villages. This sedentism, or settled way of life, had far-reaching consequences for human society, allowing for larger populations and the accumulation of resources.

Early farmers in the Volta basin would have focused on crops suited to the climate and soil, likely including grains like millet or sorghum, which remain staple foods in the region today. The development of farming techniques, even basic ones, required observation, experimentation, and communal effort. This new way of life wasn't necessarily easier than hunting and gathering, but it offered a different kind of stability.

Life in these early agricultural settlements would have centered around the cyclical demands of planting, tending, and harvesting crops. Daily routines were dictated by the seasons and the need to protect fields from pests and unpredictable weather. These communities likely developed stronger ties to specific pieces of land, leading to rudimentary forms of land ownership or communal tenure.

Alongside agriculture, early animal husbandry would have provided a more reliable source of protein and other resources than relying solely on hunting. Domesticated animals could provide milk, meat, hides, and even labor. The interplay between farming and animal rearing would have shaped the social organization and daily lives of these early villagers.

The emergence of settled life also typically corresponds with advancements in other areas of technology and craft. Pottery, for example, becomes much more common in sedentary communities as vessels are needed for storing grains, cooking, and carrying water – items less practical for nomadic peoples. Archaeological digs frequently uncover fragments of these early clay vessels.

These early settlements were likely relatively small, perhaps consisting of a few families or clans living in close proximity. Communication and interaction between different settlements would have been essential for trade, exchange of knowledge, and forming alliances, or perhaps, navigating disputes. The network of these early communities formed a nascent social and economic landscape.

The transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture was not a sudden switch but a gradual process that unfolded over centuries. Many communities may have combined elements of both lifestyles for a time, perhaps maintaining hunting practices while also cultivating small plots of land. This flexibility would have been key to survival in a

variable environment.

Understanding the precise locations and characteristics of all these early sites is an ongoing process for archaeologists. Much of the evidence lies buried and undiscovered, or has been lost to erosion and the passage of time. Each new finding adds another piece to the complex puzzle of how human societies first organized themselves in this part of West Africa.

The development of agriculture brought with it new challenges. Dependence on specific crops meant vulnerability to drought or pests. Living in denser settlements could also increase the spread of disease. These were lessons learned through generations of experience, shaping the resilience of the communities.

The period between 3600 and 2600 BC represents a critical phase in the region's prehistory. It marked a fundamental shift in how people lived, organized themselves, and interacted with their environment. These were the first steps towards the more complex societies that would eventually emerge.

Following the initial establishment of agriculture, another technological leap occurred that would have a transformative impact on the trajectory of human development: the mastery of metals. While copper and bronze technologies emerged elsewhere earlier, in West Africa, the transition often went directly from stone tools to iron.

Archaeological evidence from the region indicates that the knowledge and practice of iron smelting had appeared in what is now Burkina Faso between approximately 800 and 700 years before the common era. This represents a significant technological achievement, requiring not only finding iron ore but also developing the complex process of extracting the metal using high-temperature furnaces.

Iron working was a complex and often specialized skill. Smelters needed to understand metallurgy, build efficient furnaces using clay and other materials, and manage intense heat, often using bellows to fan the flames. The discovery of ancient slag heaps – the waste product of smelting – and remnants of furnaces provides tangible proof of this activity.

The introduction of iron technology had profound implications. Iron tools were stronger and more durable than those made of stone or wood. Iron hoes and axes could clear land more effectively for agriculture and process tough materials, potentially leading to increased food production and supporting larger populations.

Iron weapons could also be forged, altering the nature of warfare and defense. The ability to produce iron tools and weapons would have conferred significant advantages on communities that mastered the technology, potentially leading to shifts in power dynamics and the rise of more centralized or organized societies.

The mastery of iron metallurgy was not uniform across the region, nor did it appear everywhere simultaneously. It likely spread through trade, migration, and the diffusion of knowledge between different groups. Communities that gained access to iron technology could expand their activities and influence.

The period between 800 and 700 BC marks the effective beginning of the Iron Age in this part of West Africa. This era saw the development of new material cultures and laid the groundwork for the more complex social and political structures that would emerge in the subsequent centuries and millennia.

These early Iron Age communities were building upon the foundations laid by the Neolithic farmers. They were likely settled agriculturalists who integrated metalworking into their existing way of life. The increased efficiency provided by iron tools would have further solidified settled village life and potentially led to larger, more stable communities.

Trade networks likely played a crucial role in the spread of both agricultural practices and iron technology. Communities located near sources of iron ore or along established trade routes would have been centers of innovation and distribution. These networks facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and people across the landscape.

The environment of the Volta basin, with its mix of savanna and woodland, provided the resources necessary for these developments – arable land for farming, animals for domestication, and eventually, the minerals and timber (for charcoal) required for iron smelting.

While direct evidence from this period is sparse compared to later historical eras, the archaeological record speaks volumes about the ingenuity and adaptability of the early inhabitants. They faced environmental challenges, developed complex social systems, and made technological leaps that fundamentally altered their relationship with the world around them.

These early millennia witnessed the gradual shaping of the human landscape in the Volta basin. Hunter-gatherers gave way to settled farmers, and the mastery of fire for cooking evolved into the mastery of fire for transforming ore into metal. Each stage built upon the last, creating a cumulative history.

The societies of this deep past were not static. They were dynamic, changing, and adapting to new circumstances, whether environmental shifts, interactions with neighboring groups, or internal social developments. Their legacy is found not only in the archaeological sites but also in the long traditions and cultural practices that developed over time.

The specific ethnic and linguistic affiliations of these earliest inhabitants are largely unknown, lost in the mists of time before the advent of oral traditions that could preserve such details. However, their presence establishes a continuity of human habitation stretching back into the Stone Age.

The transition to settled life and the adoption of iron technology were not merely technical changes; they were catalysts for social and political evolution. Larger, more stable communities could potentially support more complex forms of organization, division of labor, and perhaps, early forms of leadership or hierarchy.

These early chapters in the history of the Volta basin are essential for understanding the later developments, including the formation of kingdoms and the interactions between different ethnic groups. The agricultural and metallurgical foundations laid during this time were prerequisites for the growth of more complex societies.

The archaeological work continues, with new discoveries constantly refining our understanding of this ancient past. Sites are excavated, artifacts analyzed, and dating techniques employed to piece together the story of these early inhabitants, revealing the depth of human history in the region.

Imagining the daily lives of these early people requires a leap of imagination, but the physical evidence provides tantalizing clues. We can envision communities working together in the fields, the glow of smelting furnaces against the night sky, and the sounds of early language echoing across the savannas.

This period represents a crucial foundation, a time when the basic human activities of sustenance, shelter, and community were established and refined over thousands of years. It was a slow, organic process of growth and adaptation within the unique environmental context of the Volta basin.

The resilience and adaptability demonstrated by these early inhabitants in navigating environmental challenges and developing new technologies set a pattern that would repeat throughout the history of the region. This deep history informs the later narratives of migration, conflict, and state formation.

While the names of individuals and the specific details of their lives remain largely unknown, their collective efforts shaped the trajectory of human development in this part of West Africa. They were the pioneers who first cultivated the land and unlocked the power of iron.

The shift towards settled life also likely led to different forms of spirituality and belief systems, tied to the land, the cycles of nature, and the ancestors who had shaped the community. Burial practices and ritual objects found by archaeologists can offer

glimpses into these aspects of life.

The knowledge of working with earth and metal, cultivating crops, and organizing community life was hard-won, passed down through generations through oral tradition, practical demonstration, and lived experience. This accumulated wisdom formed the cultural bedrock of the region.

The period stretching from the earliest hunter-gatherers through the beginnings of the Iron Age represents a fundamental era of human development in the Volta basin. It was a time of slow, incremental change that laid the groundwork for everything that followed.

These ancient beginnings remind us that the history of Burkina Faso is not just about recent political events or colonial interventions, but extends back into the deep past, revealing a long and continuous human presence marked by innovation and adaptation.

The transition from a mobile, foraging lifestyle to sedentary agriculture and subsequently the utilization of metal represented profound shifts in human capability and societal organization. These early steps were essential preconditions for the emergence of larger, more complex political entities.

Understanding these early stages is crucial for appreciating the full scope of the region's history. It highlights the long-term processes of human-environment interaction and technological development that shaped the populations and cultures of the Volta basin over millennia.

The archaeological record, though incomplete, provides compelling evidence of a vibrant and evolving human presence long before the narratives of kingdoms and empires dominate the historical accounts. This was the time when the very patterns of settlement and subsistence were established.

The early iron smelters were not just metalworkers; they were innovators whose skills empowered their communities, making life more productive and secure. Their furnaces represented the cutting edge of technology at the time.

The legacy of these ancient inhabitants can be seen in the very landscape – the traces of ancient earthworks, the scatterings of pottery shards, and the telltale signs of early metallurgical activity that still lie hidden in plain sight across the country.

Their existence underscores the deep roots of the human story in this part of West Africa, a story that began thousands of years ago with the first footsteps of hunter-gatherers and the first seeds sown by early farmers.

These early societies, while simple compared to later kingdoms, possessed a sophisticated understanding of their environment and the skills necessary to thrive within it. They were the true founders, laying the groundwork for future generations.

The transition to agriculture also facilitated an increase in population density in suitable areas, leading to closer interaction between groups and potentially increased competition for resources, shaping the social dynamics of the time.

The knowledge of iron working spread over time, but certain areas likely became centers of production, fostering trade and exchange with communities that did not possess the necessary resources or expertise. This created early economic interdependencies.

The Iron Age proper would see the flourishing of more distinct cultures and the development of larger settlements, but the initial mastery of the technology between 800 and 700 BC was the crucial first step in this transformative era.

These ancient beginnings, therefore, represent a fundamental chapter in the history of Burkina Faso, a time when the human presence was established, and the first critical steps towards settled life and technological advancement were taken, setting the stage for the complex history that would unfold over the subsequent millennia.

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