



The First Farmers in Africa, the Cradle of Humanity

By David Baker

Why didn't the first farms, the first cities, and the first empires begin in sub-Saharan Africa, where our ancestors had roamed for hundreds of thousands of years?

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Agriculture: Why wasn't Africa first?

As long as humans have existed, some have always lived in Africa. We evolved in Africa over the past 3.5 million years. *Homo erectus*, *Homo habilis*, and *Australopithecus* are just a few of our ancestors. These ancestors existed much earlier than we *Homo sapiens* (just 250,000 to 300,000 years).

Africa is the cradle of our species and our first home. In fact, human beings are a very closely related family, much more than usual in nature. DNA testing tells us that a disaster 74,000 years ago—possibly the super-eruption of Mount Toba in Indonesia—reduced the human population to a few thousand. That was 10,000 years before the biggest human migration out of Africa. As a result, there is more genetic diversity between two different groups of chimpanzees separated by a few hundred miles than there is in the entire human species now spread across Earth. The Fertile Crescent developed agriculture first, in about 9000 BCE. On the other side of the world, China and New Guinea followed in 7000 BCE. For thousands of years, the only part of Africa to farm was Egypt, which interacted closely with Southwest Asia. All of Africa below the Sahara Desert continued hunting and gathering until approximately 3000 BCE. Why did sub-Saharan Africans continue to forage when societies in other regions were turning to farming? Why didn't the first farms, the first cities, and the first empires emerge in sub-Saharan Africa, where our ancestors had roamed for hundreds of thousands of years?

African “fine tuning”

Scientists generally believe that Africans turned to agriculture later precisely because their home was the cradle of our species. For millions of years, pre-human species such as *Homo habilis*, *Homo erectus*, and the Neanderthals evolved alongside native African animals. Animals need generations to adapt their instincts to humans, to avoid being captured or hunted. African animals had a lot of time for that adaptation, so they were much more difficult to domesticate. Domesticating animals is one of the first crucial steps for farming. That's also why there is so much *megafauna* (large mammals) still in Africa, while much of it was wiped out in Australia and the Americas when humans suddenly arrived.

Humans also needed time to adapt to their environment. They evolved in Africa as foragers. In fact, earlier human species foraged for millions of years. Over many generations, humans adapted to their environment, becoming an intricate part of the ecosystem and expert foragers there. Thus, over long stretches of evolutionary time, human communities had learned to live as foragers with Africa, and Africa had learned to live with humans. But in other areas of the world, humans turned up suddenly. This abrupt appearance meant that they were not as good at foraging in those regions, and they caused rapid change, including the extinction of species. Therefore, the people in those regions had to turn to farming and pastoralism to survive.

“Gardens of Eden” and the “trap of sedentism”

Life as an early farmer was hard. Humans only stopped foraging when they became stuck in one place—the “trap of sedentism”.

Farming required a lot more work. One estimate is that a farmer needed to work 9.5 hours a day where a forager only needed to work 6. Early farming brought more disease, worse nutrition, worse health, and greater vulnerability to weather and natural disasters. For instance, we know that for a long time, foraging communities in the Kalahari Desert in Southwest Africa knew about farming but didn't adopt it. Why would anyone adopt a way of life that was far less healthy, took more work, and generally was much more miserable than foraging?

Another factor contributing to the long absence of agriculture in Africa is the absence of so-called “Gardens of Eden”—areas so lush and filled with life that foragers would settle there and could survive for a generation or so.

Once settled, their populations would grow. They would exhaust the fruits, vegetables, and plants on the land and would have to learn to farm. Being forced to give up nomadic ways in order to farm, after there was no more food to forage, is falling into the “trap of sedentism.” In Africa, there weren’t many, if any, “Gardens of Eden.” So humans roamed from region to region as foragers for hundreds of thousands of years. They entered one area, feasted on the resources, then moved on to another region while the old one naturally replenished itself over time.

Finally, Africa is a beautiful and diverse continent, but it also contains many challenging environments. The north has the harsh and deadly Sahara, which makes farming unlikely. The desert also cut off networks of communication with earlier farming societies. In fact, sub-Saharan Africans had to come up with farming independently. Farming in this region probably began in West Africa, south of the desert about 3000 BCE (some estimates are even a little earlier). The first farming started in the fairly lush and habitable savannah on the border between present-day Nigeria and Cameroon. Is it possible there actually was a “Garden of Eden” there to “trap” people into early farming? It’s not certain. Many scholars have argued that even here, farming began as a way to support pastoralists and animal breeding rather than to meet a demand for food. The continent also holds many dense forests that would be very difficult for foragers to clear, settle, and farm. Finally, diseases also had evolved alongside humans in Africa. There were many tropical diseases that made it a good idea for humans to keep moving rather than settle down.



Rectangular fields clustered around a water well, on a bank of the Niger River, near Gao, Mali
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The independent origin of African agriculture

Even as the people of West Africa began adopting some farming practices such as domesticating cattle, the efforts to domesticate plants in this area were slow. Eventually, however, West Africans began to settle and grow their food full-time. From 3000 BCE to 1000 BCE, the practice of farming spread across West Africa. These early farmers grew millet and sorghum (plants used for grain and fodder). Later, they began growing a special strain of rice native to Africa. They also grew tubers (root vegetables), yams, cowpeas, and oil palms, and began growing all sorts of fruits and melons.

Early West African farming methods made use of many crops only native to Africa. Thus, scholars have determined that farming in West Africa was not derived from Egypt or the Fertile Crescent. It seems West Africa was one of only a few regions that started farming independently. In fact, West Africa started this whole process around the same time it began in the Americas, and before it began in many other regions of the world.

The Spread of Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1000 BCE to 500 CE

Sub-Saharan Africans enjoyed the advantages of foraging for a very long time. Even after West Africans began to farm, agriculture only spread slowly to other parts of the continent. It wasn't until 1000 BCE to 500 CE that people in most regions of sub-Saharan Africa started farming. This is considerably later than some of the other regions of the world.

Nor is it clear that Africa's journey into the agrarian era was an entirely positive journey. On one hand, agriculture seems to be necessary for the building of large, technologically advanced societies. Because they developed agriculture later, some regions of Africa were at a disadvantage when they met up with European and Islamic cultures in the Common Era (CE). On the other hand, the late start of farming in sub-Saharan Africa meant many people lived well as foragers for thousands of years. They enjoyed healthier, better lives for much longer than the people of the Fertile Crescent or East Asia. Even after farming was introduced, large areas of Africa escaped the rigid hierarchies, the rule of cruel kings, and the widening gap between the rich and poor that come with agrarian societies.



Sorghum and millet bunches, annual grasses grown as grain and animal fodder, Sahel Desert, Mali, West Africa
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