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# Early prehistory of Africa

## *Human evolution*

The continent of Africa has a longer human history than any other continent in the world. When the English naturalist Charles Darwin first proposed his theory of evolution (*The Origin of Species*, 1859; and *The Descent of Man*, 1871), he suggested that the birthplace of humankind was probably Africa, and scientific research over the past three-quarters of a century has shown his supposition to have been correct.

### *Evidence: fossils, dating and climate change*

Africa is the only continent in which evidence has been found for man's early evolution. The material evidence for human evolution depends largely upon the recovery and examination of ancient bones, fossils, stone tools and other artefacts.

Fossils are formed when animal or plant remains are trapped in mud that is then squeezed under great geological pressure to form rock. All that remains of the organic matter within the rock is an exact imprint (a fossil) that is revealed if the rock is broken open, by further natural process or by human intervention. Scientific geological methods can be used to give an approximate age to the formation of rocks and hence to their fossils.

The Potassium-Argon dating technique measures the changing ratio between these two elements during radioactive decay in rocks that are over a million years old. It is particularly useful for the volcanic rocks of Ethiopia and the East African Rift. Radiocarbon dating measures the radioactive decay of Carbon-14 atoms in dead organic matter such as bones and charcoal that is less than 40,000 years old. It cannot measure a precise age, but offers instead a probable age range and is most useful in providing a chronology rather than a particular date.

The modern study of genetics has also been an important tool for tracing relationships between ancient peoples and the movement of people both within and out of Africa.

Archaeologists have recently come to appreciate the importance of climate change as a potential influencing element in early human development and behaviour. The earth has gone through many changes in climate during the millions of years of its existence, and scientists are able to measure past climates by taking deep borings from the ice sheet, particularly in Greenland. From these, and from borings into the ocean floor, it is possible to measure the climate of the distant past.

At times the world's climate has been a lot colder than at present, with the ice-coverage of the poles being extended well into the temperate zones of

Europe, Asia and North America. These ultra-cold periods, often lasting for thousands of years, are commonly known as 'ice ages'. Africa lies beyond the range of the northern and southern ice-sheets, but during the ice ages of the past, with much of the world's fresh water – and thus potential rain – tied up in ice, Africa experienced these periods as times of extreme dryness. Deserts expanded and the rainforest contracted, sometimes into isolated 'islands' of forest growth in the heart of the Congo Basin. Many animals could not cope with the changed environment and became extinct, and early humans had to adapt or die.

There have been times, too, when climate has been a lot warmer than at present. In those periods, the ice-sheets melted, extra moisture was released into the air and Africa experienced much higher rainfall. Then the rainforest expanded, rivers flowed where today is only desert, and the Sahara itself was covered in savannah grassland.

### ***The earliest hominins***

In terms of evolution modern human beings belong to the primate family of 'hominins'. Hominin (formerly known as hominid) is a general biological name for human or humanlike creatures with enlarged brains and the ability to walk upright on two legs. For tens of thousands of years modern human beings have been the only surviving hominins. But in the early stages of human evolution there were a number of different species. From the evidence of fossils it appears that many millions of years ago the earliest species of hominin evolved away from the other main family of primates, the great African forest apes: the gorilla and the chimpanzee.

There are significant gaps in the fossil evidence and so little is known about the earliest hominins. But it appears that sometime between about ten million and five million years ago, perhaps during a glacial dry period when the tropical forest contracted, they moved into the more open savannah grasslands and woodlands of east Africa. There they began to develop the techniques of standing and walking on two legs. In terms of survival and evolution this had a number of distinct advantages. In the open savannah standing upright enabled them to see over the grassland and spot predators such as lion and leopard who hunted them for food. Those best able to stand upright survived longer, reproduced more and passed this advantage on to their descendants. A further highly important advantage of two-legged walking was that it left the hands free to carry food and use tools. Fingers no longer needed to be short and strong for hanging on to branches in the forest. The early hominins were able to evolve elongated fingers for performing intricate tasks and, eventually, for making their own tools.

### ***The Australopithecines and early evolution of Homo (man)***

The fossil record of the past five million years is continually being expanded with finds of early hominin fossils from eastern and southern Africa as well as the Sahara. The evidence up to 1.5 million years ago forms a complex story of the evolution and extinction of numerous related species of early hominin. Most of these belong to the genus known as *Australopithecus* ('southern ape'). They were largely scavengers, some vegetarian, others meat-eaters, and had a brain capacity less than a third that of modern humans. They were tool *users* rather than tool *makers*: they did not shape their own tools, but rather used whatever suitable sticks and stones they found available.

An important change occurred about 2.5 million years ago with the evolution of the first tool *makers*. Because of this important change these hominins



**Figure 1.1** Olduvai Gorge, UNESCO World Heritage Site, Serengeti, Tanzania, East Africa

have been designated *Homo habilis* ('handy man'), the first of the genus *Homo*. A number of animals, such as chimpanzees, use sticks and other implements to assist in their foraging for food; but the ability to make and shape one's own tools and to use these tools for hunting as well as foraging does seem to set the *Homo* line apart from other animals and the Australopithecines. It is thought that modern humans may be descended from *Homo habilis*, although their brain capacity was still barely half that of modern human beings. Their stone tools, known as Oldowan (from the Olduvai Gorge in Kenya where they were first discovered), were simple chopping and cutting tools, made by chopping flakes off a volcanic pebble to form a sharp edge. Some of the flakes thus removed were probably also used for cutting or scraping skins and perhaps for whittling sticks. The final shape of the tool, however, was determined largely by the structure of the stone.

Some of the late species of *Australopithecus* continued to live alongside *Homo habilis*, but they found it increasingly difficult to compete for food with the more efficient *Homo* species. By the time of the next major evolutionary advance, 1.5 million years ago, the *Australopithecines* had all become extinct.

### ***Technology and the 'Stone Ages' of Africa***

From the middle of the last century it became customary for archaeologists and historians (including earlier editions of this book) to divide the period of stone tool-making in Africa into three 'ages', the Early, Middle and Late (or Later) Stone Ages. This periodisation placed the simple choppers and scrapers of the early *Homo* scavengers at one end of the spectrum and the precisely shaped and sharpened *microliths* ('tiny stones') of modern *Homo sapiens* ('wise man') hunter-gatherers at the other end. Archaeologists now, however, tend



to consider this periodisation as too simplistic and even misleading. The system of ages necessarily implies primitivity for simple tools and advanced intellect for complex microliths. And yet, simple tools were often used alongside microliths, with no implication that they were evidence of the continued existence of more primitive people.

Thus, rather than slot a particular technology and its users into a particular 'age', the tendency nowadays among archaeologists and historians is to focus upon the technology and try to work out what it tells us about the people using the tools.

### ***Climate change and the evolution of modern humans***

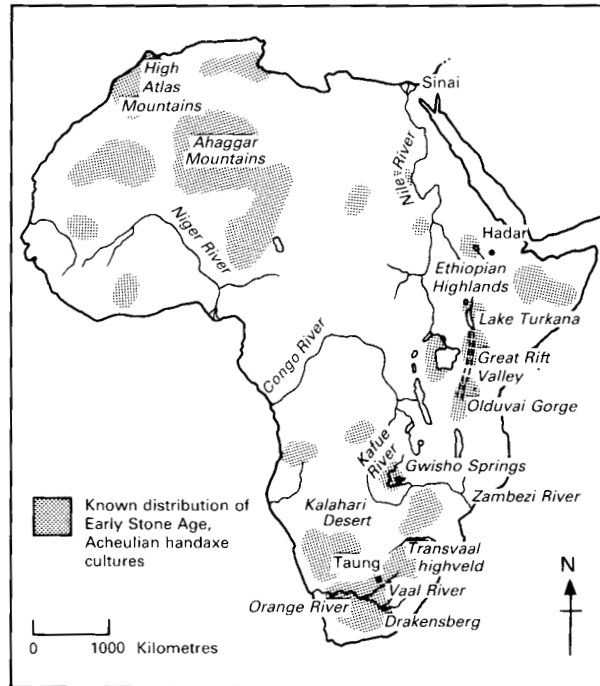
Over the past two million years the earth has experienced numerous ice ages, some lasting a few hundred thousand years, others, just as severe, lasting only a few thousand, each age interspersed with warmer moist periods. With increasing evidence of the timing and extent of past climate change, archaeologists have come to appreciate the probable impact of these glacial cycles upon the evolution of the human species and their technology. For Africa the cool dry climate of the ice ages appears to have provided the greatest pressure for adaptation.

During the particularly long, dry glacial period of 1.8 million years ago to 1.6 million years ago, *Homo erectus* ('upright man') evolved and appears to have displaced the earlier *Homo habilis*. *Homo erectus* had a larger brain (two-thirds that of modern humans) and larger body, better able to roam great distances across the expanded open savannah. They were the first hominins to make specific and precise stone tools, to a predetermined shape. The tool for which they are best known is the handaxe, known as 'Acheulian' after the place in France where one was first discovered. The handaxe was a tough, sharp, heavy tool, chipped on both sides and shaped to a deliberate point (see Figure 1.2, p. 14). It could have been used for slicing, chopping or digging.

Archaeologists have found some beautifully made examples of the Acheulian handaxe which must have been the product of hours of skilled labour. Some may even have had symbolic ritual functions. There are certainly signs of some form of ritual or early religion with the beginnings of the deliberate burial of the dead. Furthermore, with *Homo erectus* we have the first sign of the use of regular, seasonal camps and cooperative hunting efforts as opposed to simple scavenging. They had also learned to control and use fire, possibly for hunting, certainly for roasting meat and probably also for warmth.

*Homo erectus* was the first hominin to move out of Africa into Asia and Europe. Evidence of their remains, or the tools they made between one million and just over half a million years ago have been found all over Africa, southern Europe and Asia, even as far away as China. Despite the French origin of the name, however, the vast majority of Acheulian tools have been found in Africa.

Between about one million and 500,000 years ago there was a great deal of climate and environmental instability. This must have put a great deal of pressure upon the African population of *Homo erectus* and by about 600,000 years ago they appear to have been replaced in the fossil record by the evolution of *Homo heidelbergensis*, the common ancestor of *Homo neanderthalus* and *Homo sapiens*. A skull found at Kabwe (Broken Hill) in Zambia in 1921 and dated to sometime after 400,000 years ago is a clear African example of *Heidelbergensis*. From the archaeological evidence of their camps we know



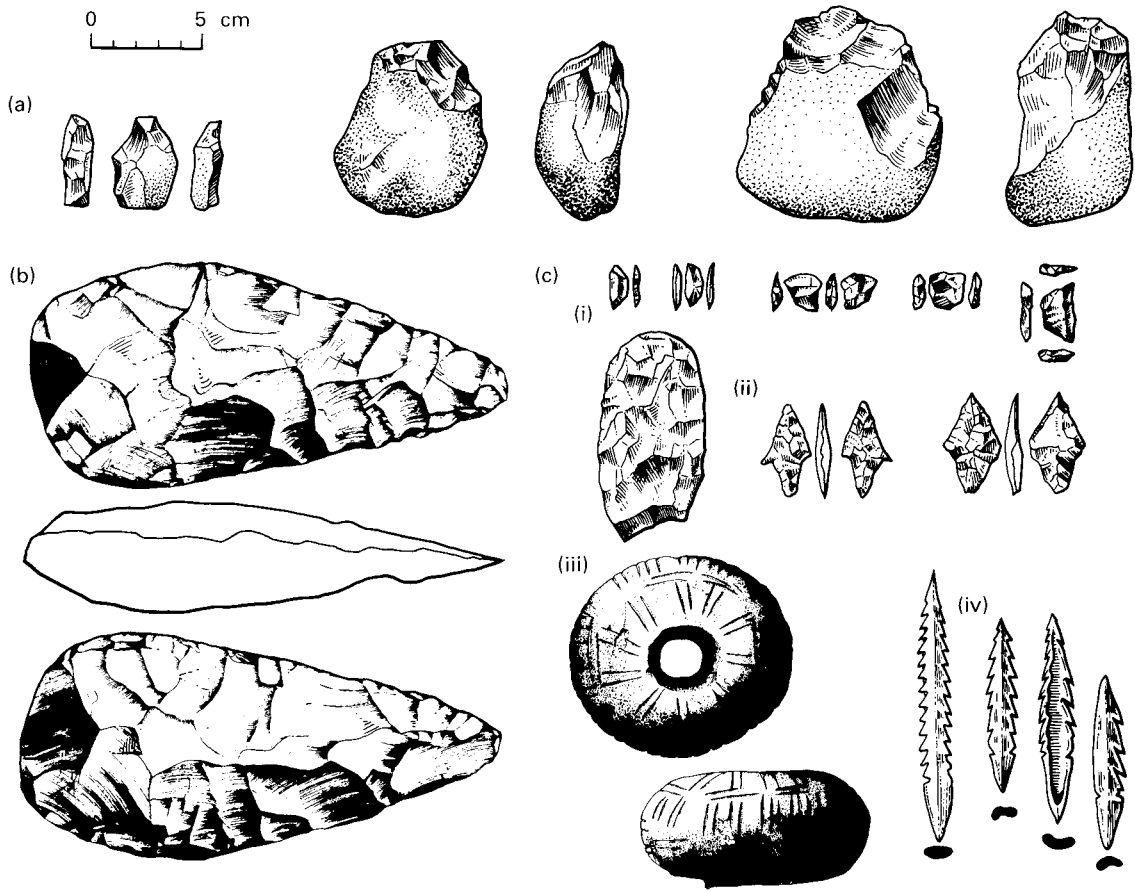
**Map 1.1** The evolution of humankind in Africa

that about 500,000 years ago the social group size of *Heidelbergensis* had increased to about 150 individuals. This has given rise to the assumption that early forms of human language must have been developed by this time, language being the only way that a group of this size could have functioned together socially. Over the following 200,000 years their stone-tool technology became more complex, with stone, wood and bone being used in conjunction to make composite tools.

By 300,000 years ago *Heidelbergensis* had evolved the same brain size as modern humans and had begun to move into Asia and Europe. It was from these that the European Neanderthals evolved. Meanwhile, those Heidelbergers that remained in Africa gave way to modern *Homo sapiens* about 200,000 years ago.

### ***Homo sapiens*** ***populate the world***

The evolution of fully modern human beings appears to have occurred in the savannah woodlands of eastern and southern Africa. These people had the same brain capacity and ability to think as people in our own century. They were, in effect, the same as us. The only thing they lacked was our learned experience and accumulated knowledge. They were thus the original *pioneers* in the development of human thought, philosophy, religion and technology. Although population levels were still very low by today's standards, by 90,000 years ago *Homo sapiens* were to be found across most of the African continent. Modern DNA tracings show that all modern human populations stem from this African origin. They first migrated out of Africa about 60,000 years ago, during a particularly dry period when population levels in Africa were dangerously low. They appear to have crossed the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb from Djibouti to Arabia and thence spread through southern Asia



**Figure 1.2** Microliths and other artefacts of the African Stone Age

- (a) Oldowan tools from the Olduvai gorge  
 (b) The characteristic Acheulian handaxe, from Kamoia, southern Congo  
 (c) (i) microliths; (ii) axe and arrow heads; (iii) decorated bored stone for weighting a digging stick; (iv) bone harpoon heads

to Malaysia and on to Australia. Other major migrations both in and out of Africa are thought to have occurred, via Sinai, between 45,000 and 40,000 years ago. By 12,000 years ago modern humans had spread to all the major regions of the world.

Since the earliest *Homo sapiens* came from tropical Africa, they were probably brown-skinned and similar in appearance to one or more of the many variations of African peoples today. As they spread throughout Africa and colonised the other continents of the world, they adapted to variations in climate and environment. Those in the heat of tropical Africa developed the darkest skin to protect them from the harmful rays of the direct tropical sun. Those moving to cooler climates developed paler skins in order to absorb more of the beneficial rays of the less direct sunlight. The so-called 'racial differences' between the various peoples of the world are thus literally only skin deep, local adaptations to climate and environment. All human beings belong to the same species, and the origins of that species are to be found in Africa.

The stone technology most closely associated with *Homo sapiens* is the *microlith*. Stone flakes were shaped and reshaped into tiny precise points and

blades, sometimes in specific geometric shapes such as triangles and crescents. The thick edge of the blade was chipped back to make it steeper and stronger. These 'backed' blades were almost certainly hafted on to wooden shafts to form spears and arrows. One of the main advances in hunting technology during the period from 40,000 years ago was the development of the bow and arrow. This enabled a great improvement in hunting techniques. At the same time people made a wide range of fine bone tools: awls, needles, fish-hooks and barbs for arrows or harpoons. Furthermore, there is evidence of considerable artistic development from eggshell beads to adorn the person to the great works of rock painting and engraving found across many parts of Africa.

## **Homo sapiens, *the hunter-gatherer***

Until such time as people developed the techniques of growing their own food crops and taming their own animals, they relied for their livelihood upon hunting and gathering the wild animals and plants that grew naturally in the land. Even their tools and ornaments – made of stone, bone, leather or eggshell – were the product of natural materials gathered from the land.

Much of our knowledge about the way of life of these hunter-gatherers has come from extensive archaeological research, particularly over the past 40 years. Evidence of microlith technology has been found widespread throughout the savannah grasslands and dry woodlands of Africa. Perhaps the richest single source has been the excavation at Gwisho springs in the Kafue valley of central Zambia. Here in the waterlogged soils of the Kafue flats a unique range of vegetable matter as well as stone and bone materials have been preserved, together with as many as 30 human skeletons. The site dates to about 2000 BCE (Before the Common Era). This and other less dramatic sites in eastern, central and southern Africa reveal a fairly clear picture of a hunting and gathering way of life probably typical of many of the peoples of the savannah regions of Africa.

But perhaps the most vivid evidence surviving from these times is to be found in the paintings and engravings which the people themselves made on the rock walls of their caves and shelters. Examples of these have survived right across the drier regions of Africa from the mountains of the central Sahara in the north to the Drakensberg mountain range in the south. Their paints – mainly red, yellow, orange and white – were made from animal fats coloured with vegetable dyes and applied with sticks and feathers. Most show scenes of living creatures, animals and humans. Some appear to portray events such as hunting, fishing or dancing. Others are more abstract and may be inspired by religious beliefs about life, death and the spirit world.

### ***Hunting***

Careful study of the animal bones and stone artefacts recovered from their camp sites has revealed much about the hunting practices of these modern humans. In the savannah regions of Africa, they hunted a wide range of animals, large and small. Specially shaped microliths were glued and bound to wooden shafts to form multi-barbed spears, but perhaps the most important hunting weapon was the bow and arrow. The arrow shaft was tipped with a barbed point of stone or bone which had been treated with carefully

**Figure 1.3** 'Pygmy' boy sorting fishing nets in the Congo Basin



prepared vegetable poison. This enabled small groups of hunters to effectively hunt the large antelope and buffalo that ranged the plains of Africa. The poison, though slow to work, would eventually wear down even the largest animal. Many smaller animals were also caught in snares, traps and possibly nets. In the densely wooded areas of the tropical forest regions, the lightweight bow and arrow was not so widely used. Here larger, simpler tools and weapons were preferred as people hunted with traps, pits, spears and axes.

Hunted animals were not only a source of meat for diet: their bones were used for making tools and ornaments while the leather of their skins was a valuable raw material. Animal skins were scraped with sharp, thumb-sized stone scrapers. They were then dried, softened and used for clothing, shelter, leather thongs, gathering bags or slings for carrying babies.

## ***Fishing***

Most people took advantage of whatever food resources were readily available, including fishing in rivers and lakes. Fish are rich in protein and when abundant they are fairly easily caught in large numbers once the technology has been mastered. In some areas, such as western and southern Africa, shellfish gathered from among the rocks along the coast became a dominant source of food, with important implications for the lifestyle of the communities involved. It demanded only a simple technology and encouraged the establishment of seasonal camps. Stranded seals were hunted at certain times of the year and bone-tipped harpoons, tidal traps and nets were also employed in active fishing.

## ***Gathering***

While the archaeological evidence for hunting and fishing is fairly easily interpreted, the evidence for gathering is not so obvious. Vegetable matter tends not to survive so well over the centuries as animal bones or the stone tips of spears and arrows. Twentieth-century studies of the few surviving hunter-gatherer communities, however, revealed that gathering accounted for up to three-quarters of the normal daily diet. There is no reason to suppose that gathering was any less important for the hunter-gatherers of the distant past.

Gathering was probably done mainly by the women, using digging sticks and carrying bags. They collected a variety of wild fruits, nuts and melons, and dug up edible roots and tubers from the ground. They also collected things like termites, caterpillars and locusts. In many ways the gathering of plant food was more reliable than hunting. The fruits of trees and bushes could be harvested each year and experienced gatherers could move around from place to place according to the seasonal harvests of various plants.

## ***Social organisation***

From the evidence of their camp sites it appears that hunter-gatherer communities usually lived in small family-sized groups. In drier regions these often comprised no more than about 20 individuals. In wetter regions where game and vegetable food was abundant, they seem to have lived in groups of up to 50 or even 100 people. But whatever the size of group, they were probably loosely organised on a family basis. Judging by the experience of recent hunter-gatherer groups, there was free movement between groups for marriage or other purposes. Where caves and overhanging rocks were available, they used these for shelters. In more open countryside they made temporary wind-breaks out of branches, grass and stones. In some areas, where seasonal camps were used for weeks or months at a time, conical shelters might be built of sticks bent and bound together and thatched with grass.

Recent studies of Khoesan (Khoisan) hunters of the Kalahari suggest that one of the most important aspects of hunter-gatherer groups was their dependence upon cooperative labour and communal effort for survival. Though there was a division of labour between men and women, neither one had higher status than the other. They recognised their equal dependence upon each other. At the end of the day gathered and hunted food was brought back to the camp and shared equally among the group. No special status was granted to the successful hunter. (See Figure 1.4 for a photograph of modern San people.)

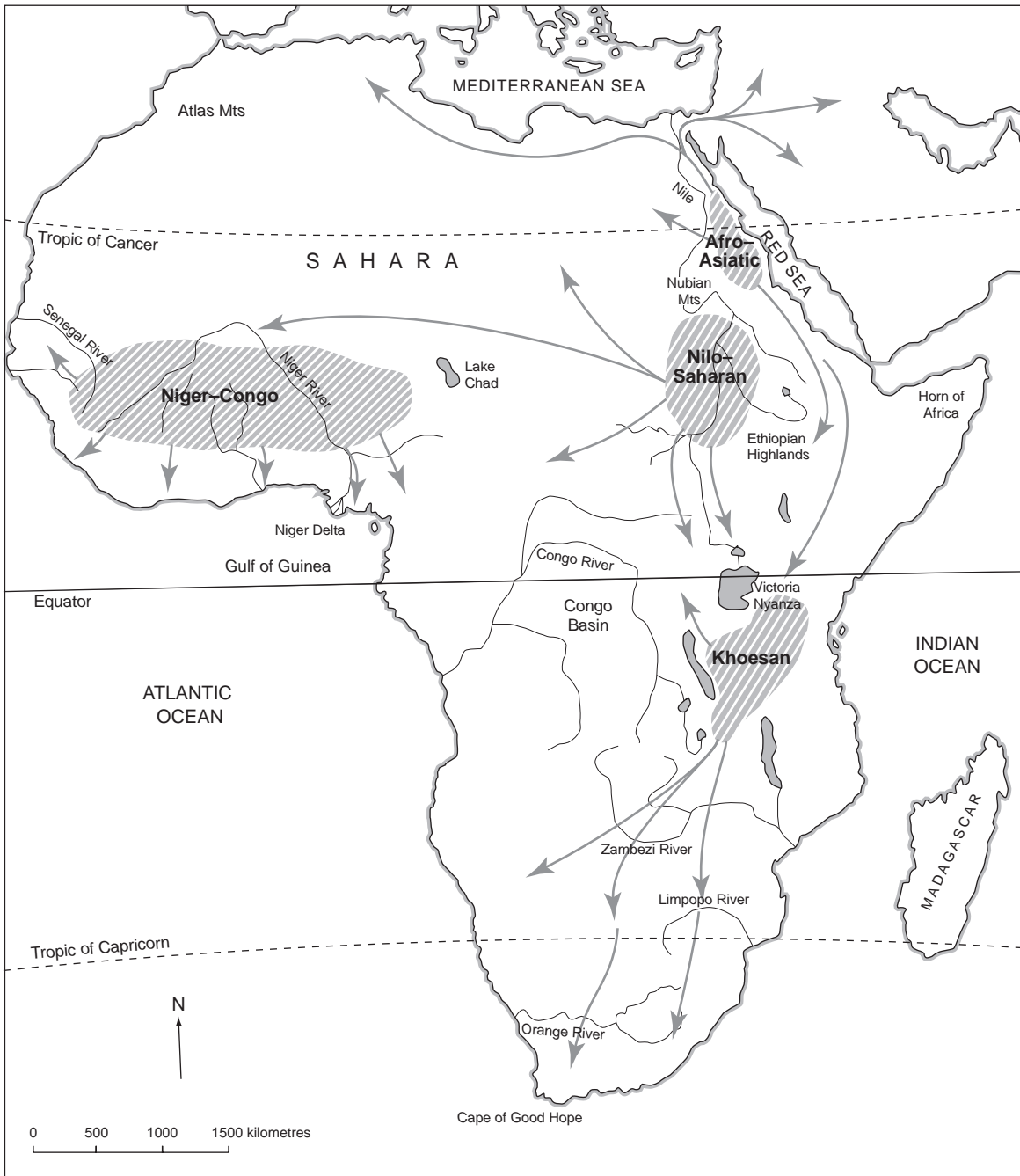
**Figure 1.4** A modern photograph of the Kalahari San



### *Further climate change, adaptation and the ancestry of African languages*

In the period 20,000 to 16,000 BCE the climate and vegetation of Africa was similar to what it was until recent decades (see Map 0.2, p. 6). The Congo Basin was dominated by rainforest vegetation that stretched along most of the west African coastal region as far as southern Senegal. North and south beyond this lay drier forest, giving way to open woodland savannah, grassland savannah, dry steppe and then desert. On the plateaux of east and southern Africa, savannah woodlands and grasslands predominated. Between 16,000 and 11,500 BCE, however, Africa experienced a much drier climate: the rainforest contracted and the desert zones expanded. Human populations faced a crisis as old hunting and gathering techniques were found to be inadequate for the changed environment. It is thought that population levels dropped dramatically at this time. Those that did learn to adapt, however, spread their technology, and with it their cultures and languages, to the four corners of the continent. It is to them that the ancestry of the four indigenous language families of modern Africa can be traced.

Linguists who have studied the language families of Africa have traced the probable origins of at least three of the four to the general region of north-eastern Africa and the middle and upper valley of the Nile (see Map 1.2). Between the Nile cataracts of Nubia (northern Sudan), the Red Sea and the Ethiopian highlands, ancestral speakers of the Afro-Asiatic language family specialised in collecting wild grasses and roots. They roasted the seeds and, using grinding stones, ground them and the dried roots into flour that they baked as flat bread. The Afro-Asiatic speakers expanded southwards into and around the Ethiopian highlands, through the 'Horn of Africa', and on to the east African plateau where they were the ancestors of Cushitic-speaking peoples. They also took their grass-threshing and grinding techniques northwards into Egypt and western Asia. In due course they spread westwards across north Africa where they assimilated the earlier Capsian hunter-gatherers and became the ancestors of the Berber-speaking peoples.



**Map 1.2** The spread of African languages, 15,000–10,000 BCE

South of the Afro-Asiatic speakers, in the grazing lands between the Nubian Mountains and the middle Nile, the ancestors of the Nilo-Saharan language speakers are thought to have had their origins. They specialised in hunting the large antelope that grazed these favourable grasslands, using mainly throwing spears. Their prey probably included ancestors of the wild Saharan cattle that they were later to domesticate. They spread mostly



**Figure 1.5** A Khoesan hunter in Zimbabwe photographed c.1900, one of the few such people to have survived in that region into the twentieth century



westwards along the grassland zone south of the Sahara towards Lake Chad and the Niger Bend. The Songhay-speakers of the middle Niger can be traced to this origin. Nilo-Saharan also spread southwards towards the Great Lakes, south-west of the Ethiopian highlands, and are ancestral to the Shilluk, Dinka, Nuer and Acholi of this region.

South and west of the Nilo-Saharan the ancestors of the Niger-Congo language family specialised in hunting the woodland savannah of west Africa armed with bow and poisoned arrow. They also dug for wild yams and fished with hook and line and probably baskets too. The languages of Kordofan, west of the middle Nile, are linked to the Niger-Congo family, which has prompted some linguists to suppose that Kordofan may have

been the original ancestral home of the Niger-Congo group, that then migrated westwards to west Africa. Others, however, feel it was more likely the other way round, with Kordofanian being a remote offshoot of Niger-Congo. Stone Age hunters of the Congo forest, known to archaeologists as the Lupemban tradition, are probably ancestral to the Bambuti and Batwa hunters of modern times. Their ancestral languages have been lost as they were, from about 1000 BCE, absorbed into the Bantu-language sub-group of the Niger-Congo family (see below, Chapter 4).

Finally, the Khoesan family appears to have had its origins in the east-African region of Tanzania. Their main strength lay in the wide range of their hunting and gathering microlith technology, the bow and poisoned arrow and the bored-stone weighted digging stick for unearthing edible tubers. The Khoesan-speakers spread throughout south-central and southern Africa, assimilating earlier hunter-gatherers. Their technology was particularly suited to exploiting the dry, semi-desert zones of South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, which is probably why their hunting and gathering culture survived into modern times in these areas. In most of eastern, central and southern Africa the Khoesan were assimilated by Bantu-speakers of the Niger-Congo group from the beginning of the Common Era (see below, Chapter 4). Their only descendants surviving in Tanzania are the Hadza and Sandawe.

The spread of languages and cultures described in this section was a process of assimilation rather than displacement. In some cases it may have been the technology and its associated culture and language that spread rather than actual people in any great numbers. Their new techniques for surviving in adverse circumstances, however, were so successful that they resulted in two consequences of major importance for the later prehistory of Africa. In the first place their languages, social customs and religious beliefs came to dominate and assimilate all previous languages and cultures on the continent. The combination of the old and the new produced unique new regional cultures and dialects that formed the ancestral origins of Africa's historic peoples. Secondly, their knowledge and understanding of intensive hunting and gathering in adverse environmental conditions laid the foundation for the development of farming and pastoralism as soon as more favourable climatic conditions prevailed.

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