The vast East African region, ranging from Sudan in the north to Tanzania and the Indian Ocean islands in the south, is an area of great diversity. Although the islands are the homes of distinctive civilizations with ties to Asia, their interactions with the African mainland give their inclusion here validity. Ecological features such as the Great Rift Valley, the prevalence of cattle-herding lifestyles, and long-standing participation in the Indian Ocean trading networks are some of the region’s unifying aspects.

**CATTLE-HERDING SOCIETIES**

A long-horned cow would be an appropriate symbol for East Africa. Most of the region’s rural inhabitants, who make up the majority of people from the Horn, to Lake Malawi, to Madagascar, value cattle for their social as well as economic importance. The Nuer of Sudan, the Somalis near the Red Sea (who, like many other peoples of the Horn, herd camels as well as cattle, goats, and sheep), and the Maasai of Tanzania and Kenya are among the pastoral peoples whose herds provide their livelihoods. Farming communities such as the Kikuyu of Kenya, the Baganda of Uganda, and the Malagasy of Madagascar also prize cattle.

Much of the East African landmass is well suited for herding. Whereas the rain forests of West and Central Africa are generally infested with tsetse flies, whose bite is fatal to livestock, most of East Africa is made up of belts of tropical and temperate savanna, which are ideal for grazing. Thus pastoralism has long been predominant in the savanna zones of West and Southern, as well as East, Africa. Tropical rain forests are found in East Africa only on the east coast of Madagascar and scattered along the mainland’s coast. Much of the East African interior is dominated by the Great Rift Valley, which stretches from the Red Sea as far south as Malawi. This geological formation is characterized by mountains as well as valleys, and it features the region’s great lakes, such as Lake Albert, Lake Tanganyika, and Lake Malawi.

People have been moving into and through the East African region since the existence of humankind; indeed, most of the earliest human fossils have been unearthed in this region. Today, almost all the mainland inhabitants speak languages that belong to either the Bantu or Nilotic linguistic families. There has been much historical speculation about the past migration of these peoples, but recent research indicates that both linguistic groups have probably been established in the area for a long time, although oral traditions and other forms of historical evidence indicate locally important shifts in settlement patterns into the contemporary period. Iron working and, in at least a few cases, small-scale steel production have been a part of the regional economy for more than 2,000 years. Long-distance trade and the production of various crafts have also existed since ancient times.

The inhabitants of the region have had to deal with insufficient and unreliable rainfall. Drought and famine in the Horn and in areas of Kenya and Tanzania have in recent years changed lifestyles and dislocated many people.

**ISLAMIC INFLUENCE**

Many of the areas of East Africa have been influenced—since at least as far back as Roman times and perhaps much further—by the Middle East and other parts of Asia. Over the past thousand years, most parts of East Africa, including the Christian highlands of Ethiopia and the inland interlake states such as Buganda, Burundi, and Rwanda, became familiar to the Muslim Arab traders of the Swahili and Red Sea coasts and the Sudanese interior. Somalia, Djibouti, and Sudan, which border the Red Sea and are close to the Arabian Peninsula, have been the countries most influenced by Arab Islamic culture. Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, began as an Islamic trading post in the tenth century A.D. The Islamic faith, its various sects or brotherhoods, the Koran, and the Shari’a (the Islamic legal code) are predominant throughout the Horn, except in the Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands and southern Sudan. In recent years, many Somalis, Sudanese, and others have migrated to the oil-rich states of Arabia to work.

Farther south, in the communities and cultures on the perimeters of the east coast, Arabs and local Bantu-speaking Africans combined, from as early as the ninth century but especially during the 1200s to 1400s, to form the culture and the language that we now call Swahili. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Seyyd Said, the sultan of Oman, transferred his capital to Zanzibar, in recognition of the outpost’s economic importance. Motivated by the rapid expansion of trade in ivory and slaves, many Arab–Swahili traders began to establish themselves and build settlements as far inland as the forests of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. As a result, some of the noncoastal peoples also adopted Islam, while Swahili developed into a regional lingua franca.

The whole region from the Horn to Tanzania continued to be affected by the slave trade through much of the
In the drought-affected areas of East Africa, people must devote considerable time and energy to the search for water.

nineteenth century. Slaves were sent north from Uganda and southern Sudan to Egypt and the Middle East, and from Ethiopia across the Red Sea. Others were taken to the coast by Arab, Swahili, or African traders, either to work on the plantations in Zanzibar or to be transported to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean islands.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, South Asian laborers from what was then British India were brought in by the British to build the East African railroad. South Asian traders already resided in Zanzibar; others now came and settled in Kenya and Tanzania, becoming shopkeepers and bankers in inland centers, such as Kampala and Nairobi, as well as on the coast, in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam or in smaller stops along the railroad. South Asian laborers were also sent in large numbers to work on the sugar plantations in Mauritius; their descendants there now make up about two-thirds of that island's population.

The subregions of East Africa include the following: the countries of the Horn, East Africa proper, and the islands. The Horn includes Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan, which are associated here with one another not so much because of a common heritage or on account of any compatibility of their governments (indeed, they are often hostile to one another), but because of the movements of peoples across borders in recent times. East Africa proper is comprised of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, which do have underlying cultural ties and a history of economic relations, in which Rwanda and Burundi have also shared. The Indian Ocean islands include the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Seychelles, which, notwithstanding the expanses of ocean that separate them, have certain cultural aspects and current interests in common.

**THE HORN**

Ethiopia traditionally has had a distinct, semi-isolated history that has separated the nation from its neighbors. This early Christian civilization, which was periodically united by a strong dynasty but at other times was disunited, was centered in the highlands of the interior, surrounded by often hostile lowland peoples. Before the nineteenth century, it was in infrequent contact with other Christian societies. In the 1800s, however, a series of strong rulers reunified the highlands and went on to conquer surrounding peoples such as the Afar, Oromo, and Somali. In the process, the state expanded to its current boundaries. While the empire's expansion helped it to preserve its independence during Africa's colonial partition, sectarian and ethnic divisions—a legacy of the imperial state-building process—now threaten to tear the polity apart.

Ethiopia and the rest of the Horn have been influenced by outside powers, whose interests in the region
In the nineteenth century, both Britain and France became interested in the Horn, because the Red Sea was the link between their countries and the markets of Asia. This was especially true after the completion of the Suez Canal in the 1860s, which made the imperial powers more interested in ports on the Red Sea. They then began to compete over the border Nile in modern Sudan. In the 1890s, French forces, led by Captain Jean Baptiste Marchand, literally raced the present-day area of Congo to reach the center of Sudan before the arrival of a larger British expeditionary force, which had invaded the region from Egypt.

Ultimately, the British were able to consolidate their control over the entire Sudan.

Italian ambitions in the Horn were initially encouraged by the British, in order to counter the French. Italy's defeat by the Ethiopians at the Battle of Adowa in 1896 did not deter its efforts to dominate the coastal areas of Eritrea and southeastern Somalia. Later, under Benito Mussolini, Italy briefly (1936-1942) occupied Ethiopia itself.

During the Cold War, great-power competition for control of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, with their strategic locations near the oil fields of the Middle East as well as along the Suez shipping routes, continued between the United States and the Soviet Union. Local events sometimes led to shifts in alignments. Before 1977, for instance, the United States was closely allied with Ethiopia, and the Soviet Union with Somalia. However, in 1977-1978, Ethiopia, having come under a self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist government, allied itself with the Soviet Union, receiving in return the support of Cuban troops and billions of dollars' worth of Socialist bloc military aid, on loan, for use in its battles against Eritrean and Somali rebels. The latter group, living in Ethiopia's Ogaden region, were seeking to become part of a greater Somalia. In this irredentist adventure, they had the direct support of invading Somali troops. Although the United States refused to counter the Soviets by in turn backing the irredentists, it subsequently established relations with the Somali government at a level that allowed it virtually to take over the former Soviet military facility at Berbera.

**Discord and Drought**

The countries of the Horn, unlike the other states in the region, are politically alienated from one another. There is thus little prospect of an effective regional community emerging among them in the foreseeable future. Although the end of the Cold War has reduced the interest of external powers, local animosities continue to wreak havoc in the region. The Horn continues to be bound together and torn apart by millions of refugees fleeing armed conflicts in all of the states. Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan have suffered under especially vicious authoritarian regimes that resorted to the mass murder of dissident segments of their populations. Although the old regimes have been overthrown in Ethiopia and Somalia, peace has yet to come to either society. Having gained its independence only in 1993, Eritrea, one of Africa's newest nations, has struggled to overcome the devastating legacy of its 30-year liberation struggle against Ethiopia. Eritrea's well-being has been further compromised by reverses in a border war with Ethiopia. Recent battlefield victories against the Eritreans have revived the passions of some Ethiopians who have never fully accepted Eritrea's secession. The stability of neighboring Djibouti, once a regional enclave of calm, has also been compromised in recent years by sometimes violent internal political conflicts.

The horrible effects of these wars have been magnified by recurrent droughts and famines. Hundreds of thousands of people have starved to death in the past decade, while many more have survived only because of international aid efforts.

Ethiopians leave their homes for Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan for relief from war and famine. Sudanese and Somalis flee to Ethiopia for the same reasons. Today, every country harbors not only refugees but also dissidents from neighboring lands and has a citizenry related to those who live in adjoining countries. Peoples such as the Afar minority in Djibouti often seek support from their kin in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Many Somali guerrilla groups have used Ethiopia as a base, while Somali factions have continued to give aid and comfort to Ethiopia's rebellious Ogaden population. Ethiopian factions allegedly continue to assist southern rebels against the government of Sudan, which had long supported the Tigray and Eritrean rebel movements of northern Ethiopia.

At times, the states of the region have reached agreements among themselves to curb their interference in one another's affairs. But they have made almost no progress in the more fundamental task of establishing internal peace, thus assuring that the region's violent downward spiral continues.

### THE SOUTHERN STATES OF EAST AFRICA

The peoples of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda as well as Burundi and Rwanda have underlying connections rooted in the past. The kingdoms of the Lakes Region of Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, though they have been politically superseded in the postcolonial era, have left their legacies. For example, myths about a heroic dynasty of rulers, the Chwezi, who ruled over an early Ugandan-based kingdom, are widespread. Archaeological evidence attests to the actual existence of the Chwezi, probably in the sixteenth century. Peoples in western Kenya and Tanzania, who have lived under less centralized systems of governance but nonetheless have rituals similar to those of the Ugandan kingdoms, also share the traditions of the Chwezi dynasty, which have become associated with a spirit cult.

The precolonial kingdoms of Rwanda and Burundi, both of which came under German and, later, Belgian control during the colonial era, were socially divided between a ruling warrior class, the Tutsis, and a much
larger peasant class, the Hutus. Although both states are now independent republics, their societies remain bitterly divided along these ethnoclass lines. In Rwanda, the feudal hegemony of the Tutsis was overthrown in a bloody civil conflict in 1959, which led to the flight of many Tutsis. But in 1994, the sons of these Tutsi exiles came to power, after elements in the former Hutu-dominated regime organized a genocidal campaign against all Tutsis. In the belief that the Tutsis were back on top, millions of Hutus then fled the country. In Burundi, Tutsi rule was maintained for decades through a repressive police state, which in 1972 and 1988 resorted to the mass murder of Hutus. Elections in 1993 resulted in the country’s first Hutu president at the head of a government that included members of both groups, but he was murdered by the predominantly Tutsi army. Since then, the country has been teetering on the brink of yet another catastrophe, as some of its politicians try to promote reconciliation.

Kenya and Uganda were taken over by the British in the late nineteenth century, while Tanzania, originally conquered by Germany, became a British colony after World War I. In Kenya, the British encouraged the growth of a settler community. Although never much more than 1 percent of the colony’s resident population, the British settlers were given the best agricultural lands in the rich highlands region around Nairobi; and throughout most of the colonial era, they were allowed to exert a political and economic hegemony over the local Africans. The settler populations in Tanzania and Uganda were smaller and less powerful. While the settler presence in Kenya led to land alienation and consequent immiserization for many Africans, it also fostered a fair amount of colonial investment in infrastructure. As a result, Kenya had a relatively sophisticated economy at the time of its independence, a fact that was to complicate proposals for its economic integration with Tanzania and Uganda.

In the 1950s, the British established the East African Common Services Organization to promote greater economic cooperation among its Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Ugandan territories. By the early 1960s, the links among the states were so close that President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania proposed that his country delay its independence until Kenya also gained its freedom, in hopes that the two countries would then join together. This did not occur.

In 1967, the Common Services Organization was transformed by its three (now independent) members into a full-fledged “common market,” known as the East African Community (EAC). The EAC collectively managed the railway system, development of harbors, and international air, postal, and telecommunication facilities. It also maintained a common currency, development bank, and other economic, cultural, and scientific services. Peoples moved freely across the borders of the three EAC states. However, the EAC soon began to unravel, as conflicts over its operations grew. It finally collapsed in 1977. The countries disputed the benefits of the association, which seemed to have been garnered primarily by Kenya. The ideologies and personalities of its leaders at the time—Nyerere, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, and Idi Amin of Uganda—differed greatly. Relations between Kenya and Tanzania deteriorated to the point that the border between them was closed for several years.

In 1984, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda signed an “East African Mediation Agreement,” which allowed for the division of the EAC’s assets and liabilities, along with the reopening of the Kenya-Tanzania border. This final chapter of the old Community laid the groundwork for renewed cooperation, which ultimately, in late 2001, led to the EAC’s reestablishment in a lavish ceremony at Arusha, Tanzania.

By the end of the 1980s, the value of the Community to the three economies has become clear. But political factors continued to complicate the quest for integration. In 1986, Kenya and Tanzania, along with Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, and then Zaïre (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo) pledged to prevent their territories from being used by exiles seeking to destabilize their neighbors. While this broader agreement went unenforced, political relations among Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (which in 1986 came under the control of Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Movement, after years of suffering under the brutal regimes of Amin and Milton Obote) began to improve.

From 1981, the three states were also linked in a loose nineteen-member state “Preferential Trade Area” for southern and eastern Africa. This body laid the basis for further cooperation in the areas of security, trade, and joint hydroelectric projects. Although members of the Economic Community of Central African States, Rwanda and Burundi were also linked with Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda as a subregion of the UN Commission for Africa.

In 1993, the three states established a “Permanent Tripartite Commission” to look into reviving the East African Community. By then the leaders of all three countries—Daniel M’apapa of Tanzania, Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, and Museveni—had been implementing confidence-building measures. The 1993 agreement had the goal of establishing a common market and currency zone for the region. But both Tanzania and Uganda were reluctant to move forward due to Kenya’s continued industrial advantages. The 2001 treaty has allayed these concerns by dropping a strict time frame for the removal of trade restrictions.

While full economic and political union for the EAC members (who are likely to be expanded to include Rwanda, Burundi, and perhaps Ethiopia) remains a long-term goal, some important structures have already been put in place: the East African Court of Justice, the East African Legislative Assembly, and the Secretariat. In 1998, a common East African passport was introduced that allows citizens of the three nations to cross one another’s borders freely. Progress is also reportedly being made toward free currency convertibility, reduced tariffs, and in the areas of defense and foreign policy. All of these steps have generally been greeted with popular support.
As the Tanzanian statesman Salim Salim noted: “You can choose a friend but you cannot choose a brother... In this case Kenyans and Ugandans are our brothers.”

THE ISLANDS

The Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Seychelles each have their own unique characteristics. They all have some important traits in common. All four island nations have been strongly influenced historically by contacts with Asia as well as with mainland Africa and Europe. Madagascar and the Comoros have populations that originated in Indonesia and the Middle East as well as in Africa; the Malagasy language is related to Indonesian Malay. The citizens of Mauritius and Seychelles are of European as well as African and Asian origin.

All four island groups have also been influenced by France. Mauritius and Seychelles were not permanently inhabited until the 1770s, when French settlers arrived with their African slaves. The British subsequently took control of these two island groups and, during the 1830s, abolished slavery. Thereafter the British encouraged migration from South Asia and, to a lesser extent, from China to make up for labor shortages on the islands’ plantations. Local French-based creoles remain the major languages on the islands.

In 1978, all the islands, along with opposition groups from the French possession of Réunion, formed the Indian Ocean Commission. Originally a body with a socialist orientation, the commission campaigned for the independence of Réunion and the return of the island of Diego Garcia by Britain to Mauritius, as well as the dismantling of the U.S. naval base located there. By the end of the 1980s, however, the export-oriented growth of Mauritius and the continuing prosperity of Seychelles' tourist-based economy were helping to push all nations toward a greater emphasis on market economics in their multilateral, as well as internal, policy initiatives. Madagascar and the Comoros have recently offered investment incentives for Mauritius-based private firms. Mauritians have also played prominent roles in the development of tourism in the Comoros.

In addition to their growing economic ties, the Comoros and Mauritius, and to a somewhat lesser extent, Madagascar and Seychelles, have created linkages with South Africa. In 1995, Mauritius followed South Africa's lead to become the twelfth member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).