If you were there...

You live along the Nile River, where it moves quickly through swift rapids. A few years ago, armies from the powerful kingdom of Egypt took over your country. Some Egyptians have moved here. They bring new customs, and many people are imitating them. Now your sister has a new baby and wants to give it an Egyptian name! This upsets many people in your family.

How do you feel about following Egyptian customs?

The Geography of Early Nubia

South of Egypt, a group of people settled in the region we now call Nubia. These Africans established the first great kingdom in the interior of Africa. We know this kingdom by the name the Egyptians gave it—Kush. The development of Kushite society was greatly influenced by the geography of Nubia, especially the role played by the Nile River.

The ruins of ancient Kushite pyramids stand behind those reconstructed to look the way they did when originally built.
The Land of Nubia
Today desert covers much of Nubia, but in ancient times the region was more fertile than it is now. Rain flooded the Nile every year, providing a rich layer of silt to nearby lands. The kingdom of Kush developed in this fertile area.

Ancient Nubia was rich in minerals such as gold, copper, and stone. These resources played a major role in the area’s history and contributed to its wealth.

Early Civilization in Nubia
Like all early civilizations, the people of Nubia depended on agriculture for their food. Fortunately for them, the Nile’s floods allowed the Nubians to plant both summer and winter crops. Among the crops they grew were wheat, barley, and other grains.

Besides farmland, the banks of the Nile also provided grazing land for livestock. As a result, farming villages thrived all along the Nile by 3500 BC.

Over time some farmers grew richer than others. These farmers became village leaders. Sometime around 2000 BC, one of these leaders took control of other villages and made himself king of the region. His new kingdom was called Kush.

The kings of Kush ruled from their capital at Kerma (Kar-muh). This city was located on the Nile just south of the third cataract. Because the Nile’s cataracts made parts of the river hard to pass through, they were natural barriers against invaders. For many years the cataracts kept Kush safe from the more powerful Egyptian kingdom to the north.
As time passed, Kushite society grew more complex. Besides farmers and herd-ers, some Kushites became priests and arti-sans. Early Kush was influenced by cultures to the south. Later, Egypt played a greater role in Kush’s history.

**Kush and Egypt**

Kush and Egypt were neighbors. Sometimes the neighbors lived in peace with each other and helped each other prosper. For example, Kush became a major supplier of both slaves and raw materials to Egypt. The Kushites sent materials such as gold, copper, and stone to Egypt. The Kushites also sent the Egyptians ebony, a type of dark, heavy wood, and ivory, the hard white material that makes up elephant tusks.

**Egypt’s Conquest of Kush**

Relations between Kush and Egypt were not always peaceful, however. As Kush grew wealthy from trade, its army grew stronger as well. Egypt’s rulers soon feared that Kush would grow even more powerful and attack Egypt.

To prevent such an attack from occurring, the pharaoh Thutmose I sent an army to take control of Kush around 1500 BC. The pharaoh’s army conquered all of Nubia north of the Fifth Cataract. As a result, Kush became part of Egypt.

After his army’s victory, the pharaoh destroyed Kerma, the Kushite capital. Later pharaohs—including Ramses the Great—built huge temples in what had been Kush-ite territory.

**Effects of the Conquest**

Kush remained an Egyptian territory for about 450 years. During that time, Egypt’s influence over Kush grew tremendously. Many Egyptians settled in Kush. Egyptian became the language of the region. Many Kushites used Egyptian names and wore Egyptian-style clothing. They also adopted Egyptian religious practices.

**A Change in Power**

During the mid-1000s BC the New King-dom in Egypt was ending. As the power of Egypt’s pharaohs declined, Kushite leaders regained control of Kush. Kush once again became independent.

We know almost nothing about the history of the Kushites from the time they gained independence until 200 years later. Kush is not mentioned in any historical records that describe those centuries.

**The Conquest of Egypt**

By around 850 BC Kush had regained its strength. It was once again as strong as it had been before it had been conquered by Egypt. Because the Egyptians had captured and destroyed the city of Kerma, the kings of Kush ruled from the city of Napata. Built by the Egyptians, Napata was on the Nile, about 100 miles southeast of Kerma.

As Kush grew stronger, Egypt was fur-ther weakened. A series of inept pharaohs...
Shabaka then declared himself pharaoh. This declaration began the 25th Dynasty, or Kushite Dynasty, in Egypt.

Shabaka and later rulers of his dynasty believed that they were heirs of the great pharaohs of Egypt’s past. They tried to restore old Egyptian cultural practices and renew faded traditions. Some of these practices and traditions had been abandoned during Egypt’s period of weakness. For example, Shabaka was buried in a pyramid. The Egyptians had stopped building pyramids for their rulers centuries before.

The Kushite Dynasty

After Piankhi died, his brother Shabaka (SHAB-uh-kuh) took control of the kingdom. Shabaka then declared himself pharaoh. This declaration began the 25th Dynasty, or Kushite Dynasty, in Egypt.

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The Kushite rulers of Egypt built new temples to Egyptian gods and restored old temples. They also worked to preserve Egyptian writings. As a result, Egyptian culture thrived during the 25th Dynasty.
The End of Kushite Rule in Egypt
The Kushite Dynasty remained strong in Egypt for about 40 years. In the 670s BC, however, the powerful army of the Assyrians from Mesopotamia invaded Egypt. The Assyrians’ iron weapons were better than the Kushites’ bronze weapons. Although the Kushites were skilled archers, they could not stop the invaders. The Kushites were steadily pushed southward. In just 10 years the Assyrians had driven the Kushite forces completely out of Egypt.

Reading Check
Analyzing How did internal problems in Egypt benefit Kush?

Later Kush
After they lost control of Egypt, the people of Kush devoted themselves to agriculture and trade, hoping to make their country rich again. Within a few centuries, the kingdom of Kush had indeed become prosperous and powerful once more.

Kush’s Iron Industry
The economic center of Kush during this period was at Meroë (MER-oh-wee), the kingdom’s new capital. Meroë’s location on the east bank of the Nile helped Kush’s economy to grow. Large deposits of gold could be found nearby, as could forests of ebony and other wood. More importantly, the area around Meroë was full of rich iron ore deposits.

In this location, the Kushites developed Africa’s first iron industry. Iron ore and wood for furnaces were easily available, so the iron industry grew quickly.

The Expansion of Trade
In time, Meroë became the center of a large trade network, a system of people in different lands who trade goods. The Kushites sent goods down the Nile to Egypt. From there, Egyptian and Greek merchants, or traders, carried goods to ports on the Mediterranean and Red seas and to southern Africa. These goods may have eventually reached India, and perhaps China.

Kush’s exports—items sent out to other regions—included gold, pottery, iron tools, slaves, and ivory. Kushite merchants also exported leopard skins, ostrich feathers, and elephants. In return, the Kushites received imports—goods brought in from other regions—such as fine jewelry and luxury items from Egypt, Asia, and other lands along the Mediterranean Sea.

Kushite Culture
As Kushite trade grew, merchants came into contact with people from other cultures. As a result, the people of Kush combined customs from other cultures with their own unique Kushite culture.

The most obvious influence on Kushite culture was Egypt. Many buildings in Meroë, especially temples, resembled those in Egypt. Many people in Kush worshipped Egyptian gods and wore Egyptian clothing. Kushite rulers used the title pharaoh and were buried in pyramids.

Many elements of Kushite culture were not borrowed. Kushite houses and daily life were unique. One Greek geographer noted some Kushite differences.

“The houses in the cities are formed by interweaving split pieces of palm wood or of bricks. ...They hunt elephants, lions, and panthers. There are also serpents ...and there are many other kinds of wild animals.”

—Strabo, The Geographies

In addition to Egyptian gods, the people of Kush worshipped their own gods. They also developed their own written language, Meroitic. Unfortunately, historians are not yet able to understand Meroitic.
Like the Egyptians, the people of Kush considered their rulers to be gods. Kush’s culture was similar to Egypt’s, but there were also important differences.

**Analyzing Visuals**

What can you see in the illustration that is similar to Egyptian culture?

**Analysis**

Stone carvings were made to commemorate important buildings and events, just like in Egypt. Kush’s writing system was similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics, but scholars have been unable to understand most of it.

Kush was ruled by a few different powerful queens. Queens seem to have been more important in Kush than in Egypt.

Like the Egyptians, Kush’s rulers built pyramids, but they were much smaller and the style was different.
Women in Kushite Society
The women of Kush were expected to be active in their society. They worked in the fields, raised children, cooked, and performed other household tasks.

Some Kushite women rose to positions of authority. Some served as co-rulers with their husbands or sons. A few women ruled the empire alone. Historians believe that the first woman to rule Kush was Queen Shanakhdakheto (shah-nakh-dah-KEE-toh). She ruled from 170 BC to 150 BC.

The Decline of Kush
Kush gradually declined in power. A series of problems within the kingdom weakened its economy. One problem was that Kush’s cattle were allowed to overgraze. When cows ate all the grass, wind blew the soil away, causing farmers to produce less food.

In addition, ironmakers used up the forests near Meroë. As wood became scarce, furnaces shut down. Kush produced fewer weapons and trade goods.

Kush was also weakened by a loss of trade. Foreign merchants set up new trade routes that went around Kush. One such trade route bypassed Kush in favor of Aksum (AHK-soom), a kingdom located along the Red Sea in what is today Ethiopia and Eritrea. In the first two centuries AD, Aksum grew wealthy from trade.

By the AD 300s Kush had lost much of its wealth and military might. The king of Aksum took advantage of his former trade rival’s weakness. In about AD 350 the Aksumite army of King Ezana (AY-zah-nah) destroyed Meroë and took over Kush.

In the late 300s, the rulers of Aksum became Christian. About two hundred years later, the Nubians also converted. The last influences of Kush had disappeared.

Reading Check Summarizing What factors led to the decline of Kush?

Summary and Preview From their capital at Meroë, the people of Kush controlled a powerful trading network. Next, you will learn about a land that may have traded with Kush—India.

Section 5 Assessment
Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People
1. a. Recall On which river did Kush develop?
   b. Evaluate How did Nubia’s natural resources influence the early history of Kush?
2. a. Identify Who was Piankhi and why was he important to the history of Kush?
   b. Analyze What were some elements of Egyptian culture that became popular in Kush?
   c. Draw Conclusions Why is the 25th Dynasty significant in the history of both Egypt and Kush?
3. a. Describe What advantages did the location of Meroë offer to the Kushites?
   b. Compare How were Kushite and Egyptian cultures similar?
4. a. Identify Who conquered Kush in the AD 300s?
   b. Evaluate What was the impact of new trading routes on Kush?

Critical Thinking
5. Identifying Cause and Effect Create a chart like this one. Using your notes, list an effect for each cause.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thutmose I invades Kush.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power of Egyptian pharaohs declines.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piankhi attacks Egypt.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus on Writing
6. Taking Notes on Kush Review this section and take notes on those people, places, and events that would make good clues for your riddle about Kush.