

Africa

African Empires



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Thematic Icons



Economics



Geography



Historical concepts



Government

Icons



Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page

For more instructions, see the *User Guide*.





Timeline





Where is Africa?





African geography





Early civilizations

West Africa is dominated by the Sahara Desert and the Niger River. The river was crucial in the development of early civilizations, providing fresh water for crop **irrigation**.

Civilizations began to develop along the river as far back as 5000 BC. They inhabited the **Sahel** region just south of the desert and the nearby grasslands: the **savannah**.

People soon discovered the rich **natural resources** in the rain forests along the southern coast. In 500 BC, tribes in West Africa learned how to heat some types of stone to make **iron**.



Early African society was organized around **tribes**: groups of people led by male tribal **elders** or a chief.

Families were large, partly due to the high death rate among babies and young children, and relatives were important. Extended families would usually be part of the same tribe.



Adults in the tribe would work together to provide food for everyone. This was known as a **hunter-gatherer** society.

Men hunted and farmed, and women would farm, gather nuts, berries and firewood and care for children.

How is this similar to other early civilizations you have learned about?



Early West Africans believed in **animism**, which states that trees, animals and bodies of water have individual spirits. They also held a strong belief in honoring their **ancestors**.

In early Africa, history was not written down but was learned and retold by singers and poets known as **griots**. Griots were therefore important members of African society.

Griots were storytellers, musicians and entertainers as well as holding authority on moral and social issues. They would play musical instruments such as the **balafon**, **kora** or **ngoni** to help them tell stories.



Which instrument do you think this is?

The **Sahara Desert** gets its name from an Arabic word meaning “great desert.” It is the largest hot desert in the world, covering an area of over 9 million square kilometers.

Crossing the Sahara was a dangerous journey. It took around 40 days to complete.



As the desert was so big, people could easily get lost or die of thirst. **Camels** were used for transport because they were adapted to the climate and could survive on very little water.

Early traders crossed the desert in long **camel trains** to trade goods such as salt, gold, ivory and even luxury items from the Silk Road, such as silk and spices.



The Empire of Ghana

The Empire of Ghana existed from 800 to around 1200 AD. The word “Ghana” actually means “king” in the Soninke language spoken by the people of this area. To the people who lived there, the empire was called **Wagadou**.

Ghana gained power because of its rich natural resources. Traders carried gold, salt and iron across the desert, and the Ghanaians controlled this trade.

Traders often used a method called **silent barter**. They would take goods that had been left in a specified place and leave a fair amount of gold as payment.

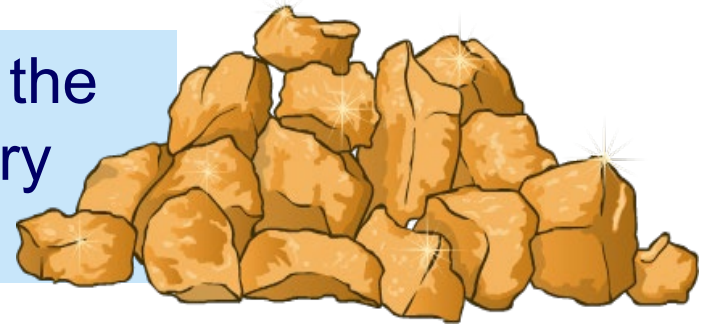


How is this different from western trade?



Ghana's empire soon became very wealthy. Later kings introduced **taxation** on goods that passed through their kingdom towards more southern nations.

Gold was plentiful in Ghana, but only the king would own gold nuggets. Ordinary people would trade in **gold dust**.



By the early 1000s, Ghana had expanded its territories and controlled many of the cities south of the Sahara. Under king **Tunka Manin**, the Ghanaian Empire reached its peak.

Ghana's capital was probably a city named **Koumbi Saleh**. Archaeologists have uncovered remains of narrow roads and stone houses, some of which had more than one story.





By the 1200s, the Empire of Ghana had collapsed. Historians believe this was due to a combination of factors:

- **overgrazing** of animals in Sahel lands near the desert, leading to soil erosion and **desertification**
- invasions by the **Almoravids**, a group of North African Muslims, which weakened the empire and cut off many trade routes
- rebellions from countries Ghana had conquered.

Around 1200, **rebels** overthrew Ghanaian rule and claimed control of their lands. However, when they were attacked by Ghana's neighbors, they couldn't defend the empire.

Ghana was incorporated into the kingdom of Mali in 1240.



The story of Mali's first ruler is told by griots in the epic poem **Sundiata**, which was named after him.

According to legend, Sundiata was a sickly and weak child, but when he realized Mali was under the control of the Susu tribe, he became determined to free his nation.

When he grew up, Sundiata became a powerful warrior. During the 1230s, he conquered the Ghanaian Empire and many other nearby lands to form the **Malian Empire**.

He took the title **Mansa** to help strengthen his hold on these new lands. Mansa means "sultan" in the **Mandinka** language, which was spoken in West Africa.





Sundiata improved Mali's **economy** and established it as a major trading center. He cleared land for farming and grew new crops such as beans, onions, rice and **cotton**.



People learned how to weave cotton fibers into soft, cool cloth that was useful in their hot climate. Cotton cloth became an important part of Mali's exports.

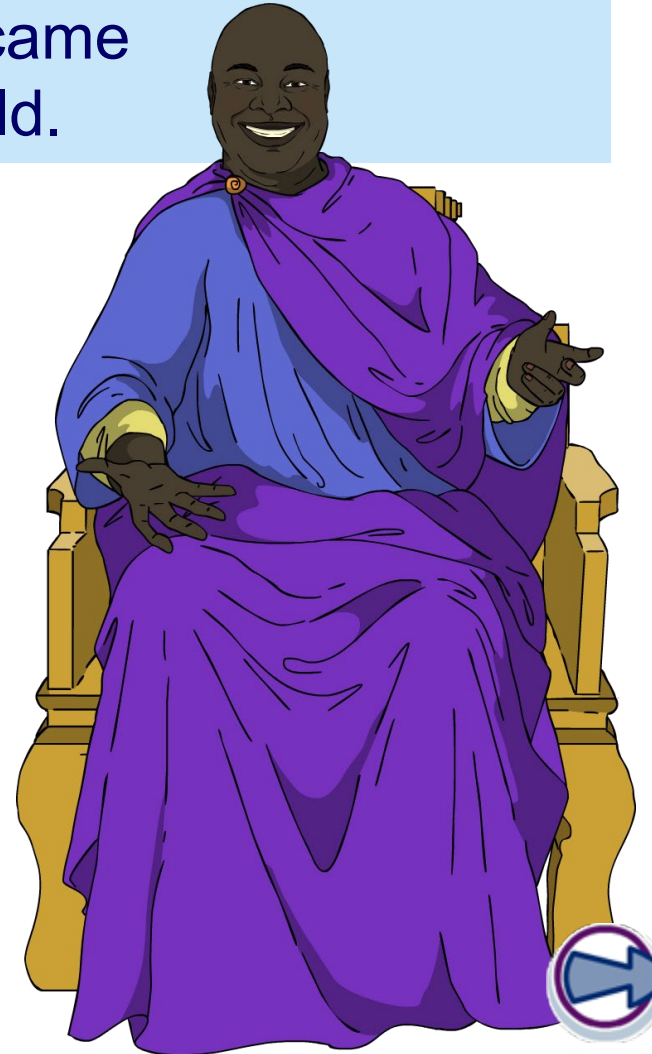
Sundiata converted to **Islam**, but he did not force his subjects to abandon their own religions. This kept him popular with his own people but also allowed him to develop better relations with Arab Muslim traders in the Sahara.



Mansa Musa ruled Mali from 1312 to 1337. During his reign, Mali peacefully expanded its borders to include important trading cities such as Timbuktu, and became one of the wealthiest empires in the world.

Mansa Musa also promoted education among his people. He sent scholars to study in Morocco and established an Islamic university in Timbuktu.

Malians were encouraged to learn to read Arabic, so that they could better study Islamic scripture.



Mansa Musa's religion was very important to him. In 1324, he began a pilgrimage to the Islamic holy city of **Mecca**.

He spent so much gold on this trip that word of Mali's riches spread to Europe. Historians have estimated that the gold Mansa Musa spent or gave away during his pilgrimage would be worth \$100 million today.

Mansa Musa spent so much that he may have destabilized Mali's **economy**. The price of gold suddenly dropped.

During his time in Mecca, Mansa Musa hired Islamic architects to build **mosques**, some of which still stand in West Africa.



The Empire of Mali kept their army ready for action whenever it was needed. Travelers who visited Mali during this time claimed that their army was around 100,000 men.

Every tribe or family was expected to provide a **quota** of young men who were able to fight. They had to bring their own weapons and any armor they used.

Weapons included bows and arrows and long **spears**, which were thrown at enemies like javelins. They also used a straight, iron sword called a **takouba**.

Takouba **hilts** were often decorated with crescent moons and the handle was covered in tooled leather.



Much of what we know about early African history comes from written accounts of visitors from Europe and Arabia. The Muslim explorer **Ibn Battuta** visited Mali in the 1350s.

Information about African culture and the arts can also be learned from items that were traded during this period.

For example, **ivory** sculptures were carved by African artisans and carried along the Sahara trade routes.

Sculptures were usually in the shape of figures, which may have been rulers, warriors or ancestors.



What does this sculpture show?

Trans-Saharan slave trade



The rise of the Songhai

Before the 1400s, the Songhai were under the control of the Mali Empire. However, since then, they had been gaining strength while the Mali Empire was in decline.

With the loss of Timbuktu in 1431, the Mali Empire was weakened and eventually collapsed. In 1464, a man named **Sunni Ali** became leader of the new **Songhai Empire**.

Sunni Ali expanded the empire and encouraged peace and harmony. Although he was a Muslim, he also participated in local religions. His people began to follow a **hybrid** of Islam and their old pagan beliefs.



How is this approach similar to the U.S. today?



One of the most famous Songhai rulers was Muhammad Ture, also known as **Askia the Great**, who lived from 1443 to 1538. “Askia” was a high-ranking military title, chosen to show his might and power.

Askia came to power in 1493. He divided the empire into five **provinces**, each with a governor who was loyal to him. These governors advised Askia about important decisions.

Under Askia, the government became more organized. He established specialized sections to run different areas of Songhai’s administration.



As ruler, Askia was the head of the military. He created a **professional army** that was always available to defend Songhai territory from foreign invaders.



Askia also improved education. He was a devout Muslim and encouraged people to study Islam and the Arabic language at **Sankore University** in Timbuktu.

The university also taught math, science, grammar, medicine and law, and the city became known as a place of learning.

A library was set up in the city mosque and books were traded in the markets alongside gold, ivory and slaves.



After the death of Askia Daoud in 1582, there was a brief **civil war** over the Songhai leadership, weakening its empire.

Across the desert, **Morocco** had been attacked by Portugal. Although they had successfully defended themselves, the Moroccans were in need of money.

Hoping to boost its economy, Morocco captured Timbuktu, Gao and Djenné, three important Songhai cities, in 1591.

The Moroccan armies were much smaller, but they had new weapons that used **gunpowder**, such as the cannon.



What do you think these weapons are?

Songhai's economy had declined in the years before the fall of the empire. Its trade routes were no longer as profitable due to the development of **Atlantic ports**.

Shipping had become a faster and more reliable way of transporting goods. Traders no longer had to journey across the Sahara. As coastal ports grew, the old trading routes became less popular.

The loss of Timbuktu, Gao and Djenné and the nearby salt mines was devastating to Songhai's economy. The empire collapsed soon after.



Can you think of any similarities between the three empires of West Africa?



Keywords

