

AFRICA'S RICH HISTORY



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Why is it important to learn about Africa's historic kingdoms and vibrant trade?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explore the emergence and history of West African kingdoms and trade.
- Analyze the meaning of a West African fable and the significance of that region's oral tradition.
- Interpret a primary source to learn about the influence of the Kingdom of Mali.
- Annotate a text on the history of the Ghana and Mali kingdoms.
- Create an original salt craft rendering depicting key features of an African kingdom.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

125 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment to project an image
- *Map of Early African Civilizations* (one to project)
- *Mansa Musa: Tenth Emperor of the Mali Empire* handout (one to project or copies for small groups)
- *The Ghana Kingdom* (one per student)
- *The Mali Kingdom* (one per student)
- Materials for art project: salt or sand, glue, construction paper, watercolor paint or food coloring, paint brushes, paper plates and cups, colored pencils or crayons



VOCABULARY

civilization

Ghana

Mansa Musa

empire

kingdom

Sahara Desert

griot/griotte

Mali

stereotype

Procedures


PART 1

Sizing Up Africa (15 mins.)

- 1** Write the following brainteaser on the board: “Which continent has the most countries?” Allow students to discuss in pairs and then have the class take a vote. Share that Africa has the most—54 countries. (Asia has 47, Europe 43, North America 23, Australia and Oceania 14, South America 12 and Antarctica 0.)
- 2** Comment that many people don’t realize Africa is so large, and some think Africa is a country, not a continent. Ask students why they think this may be so. Highlight that stereotypes of Africa as less developed, powerful and important may affect people’s perceptions about Africa’s size. Share some of the following facts about Africa:
 - 778 million people live in Africa (only Asia’s population is greater at 3.67 billion).
 - Africa is three times larger than the United States and has more than twice as many people.
 - It is estimated that more than 2,000 different languages are spoken in Africa.
 - While Africa is known for its deserts, rainforests and grasslands, the continent is rapidly urbanizing; many people live in cities and have never seen large wildlife.
 - Many of the resources we purchase come from Africa, including chocolate, coffee, gasoline, rubber, diamonds and the metals and minerals we use in our cellphones.
- 3** Share that Africa is also home to many of the great civilizations in history. Ask students if they can name any. If they struggle to identify African kingdoms, point out that this too may be the result of biases that have left African history out of many movies, books and other ways we learn about the world.

NOTE

A graphic on the Culture Trip website illustrates how vast Africa is by showing how many other countries, and even continents, can fit inside its borders: <http://bit.ly/3i8bIGC>.

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- 4** Project the handout *Map of Early African Civilizations*. Allow students to point out the kingdoms they identified in the previous step. Tell them they will learn about Ghana and Mali during this lesson, and indicate their locations on the map.

PART 2

West Africa's Oral Tradition (30 mins.)

- 5** Write *griot/griotte* on the board (these are the masculine and feminine forms of the term). Explain that griots/griottes are storytellers and counselors in West African culture, and the keepers of important facts and events. They have passed down histories and cultural values for over 2,000 years through oral traditions including folktales, songs and proverbs.
- 6** Tell students that they will explore a folktale about the spider-god, Anansi, that comes from the Ashanti people of Ghana. Explain that Anansi, a popular trickster in West African mythology, acted as a link between humans and the sky god Nyame, who turned his son into a spider as a penalty for his mischief. As a class or in small groups, have students perform the reader's theater adaptation of "Anansi and the Story Box" from Activated Story Theater (the script has seven roles): <http://bit.ly/3nJn30V>.
- 7** Debrief the reader's theater activity using some of the following questions:
- What lesson do you think the Anansi story is trying to teach or pass down to the next generation?
 - How are the Anansi stories similar to other tales you have studied from the U.S. or other cultures?
 - Anansi and other West African tales were created to teach and entertain. What fills that role in our culture?
 - What is the value of oral storytelling in a culture or society?
 - What role does storytelling play in our culture, or in your own family?

PART 3

The Richest Man of All Time (20 mins.)

8

Refer back to the *Map of Early African Civilizations* and point out Mali. Tell students that Mali was one of the most powerful African kingdoms in history and its most famous emperor was Mansa Musa. Project or distribute the handout *Mansa Musa: Tenth Emperor of the Mali Empire*. In small groups, have students analyze the image by noting their responses to the following questions:

- What kind of document do you think this might be? Who might have created it?
- How is Mansa Musa represented in the image? What does this say about his role?
- What items are shown in the image? What do you think are their importance?
- What places are shown? What do you think they might represent?
- What does the image tell us about the Kingdom of Mali?

9

Gather the class and allow small groups to share some of their observations. Refer to the following information as you discuss the image:

- The image was drawn on parchment using colored inks in 1375 by Abraham Cresques, a Jewish cartographer from Majorca (in today's Spain, then part of the kingdom of Aragon). It was part of the *Catalan Atlas*.
- It shows principal points along the trans-Saharan trade routes in West and North Africa.
- A camel caravan and major trade goods are depicted; goods in that society included gold, copper, iron, horses, salt, textiles, leather, ivory and captive peoples. The trade of gold and salt were key to the empire's wealth.
- The atlas features Timbuktu, an important center of trade and learning, then part of the Mali Empire.
- An inscription on the panel reads: "This Black lord is called Musa Mali, Lord of the Black people of Mali. So abundant is the gold which is found in his country that he is the richest and most noble king in all the land."
- Features of the Mali kingdom included centralized government, a powerful army to aid its expansion, sophisticated cities and vibrant trade.

NOTE

The image source is: Abraham Cresques, *Detail from the Catalan Atlas Sheet 6 showing Mansa Musa, 1375*, pen with colored inks on parchment, Catalan Atlas, <http://bit.ly/38H4BSw>.

NOTE

The *Huffington Post* article "Mansa Musa of Mali Named World's Richest Man Of All Time" (<http://bit.ly/35DBDAS>) estimates Mansa Musa's worth, adjusted for inflation, at \$400 billion. By comparison, today's richest people are worth \$100–200 billion.

PART 4

Worth Its Weight in Gold (60 mins.)

- 10** Distribute copies of the handouts *The Ghana Kingdom* and *The Mali Kingdom*. Read one or both together as a class, or have students read individually or in pairs. Instruct them to circle information that confirms ideas from their image analysis of Mansa Musa. In addition, tell students that they will be creating an illustration representing one important feature of these civilizations. They should underline facts and record margin notes that they think will help them with this task.

- 11** Gather the class and allow students to share their thoughts about the most important or interesting features of the Ghana and Mali civilizations. List their ideas on the board. Tell students that they will focus on one feature and create a painting to represent it using one of the most essential goods from these societies—salt. (As an alternative—so as not to waste food—sand can be used in place of salt.)

- 12** Have students follow the directions below in order to create their salt/sand paintings.
 - Draw an outline of your scene on construction paper. Add color and details using colored pencils or crayons.
 - Trace the outline with a thin line of glue.
 - Sprinkle salt/sand over the glue. Carefully shake the excess salt/sand into a bin.
 - To add color to the salt/sand, paint it with watercolors or water mixed with food coloring.
 - Give your painting a title and add a brief caption (description).

- 13** Display students' artwork and highlight some of themes that demonstrate the significance and complexity of early African societies. Conclude the lesson by discussing some of the questions on the next page.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Had you heard about the kingdoms of Ghana and Mali before? Why do you think most people know little about African civilizations in history?
- 2 Are you surprised by how wealthy, complex and powerful these civilizations were? Why?
- 3 What stood out to you most about the ways in which these societies were organized or operated?
- 4 Does what you learned match up with what you have heard about Africa in the past? Explain.
- 5 How do stereotypes about Africa and African people affect what we are taught in school or through the media?

Lesson Extensions

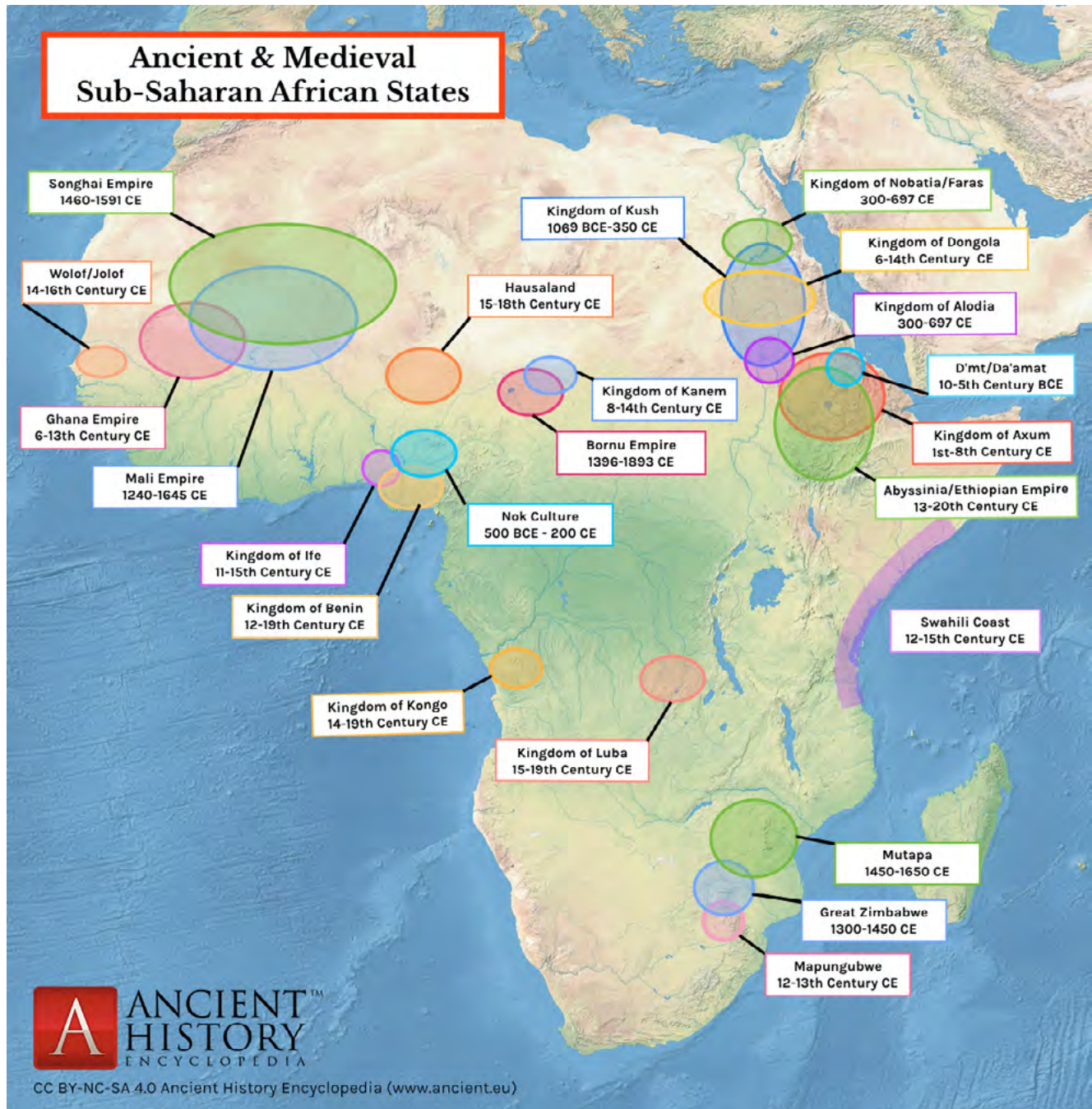
- In small groups, assign students to select and research an African kingdom they have not learned about from the *Map of Early African Civilizations*. Have them create a brief slideshow or create a map or model highlighting key features of the kingdom.
- Assign students to gather significant facts from their study of various African kingdoms and use them to design a crossword puzzle or trivia game. Have students share their puzzle/game with peers or family members and discuss the ways in which African history represents a knowledge gap for many of us.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Exploring Africa, "Curriculum," <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/curriculum>.
- + Mr. Donn's Site for Kids and Teachers, "Lesson Plans: African Kingdoms," <https://africa.mrdonn.org/kingdom-lessons.html>.
- + Knight, Margy Burns. *Africa Is Not a Country*. Minneapolis, MN: First Avenue Editions, 2002.
- + Musgrove, Margaret. *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*. New York: Puffin Books, 1992.
- + Roman, Carole P. *If You Were Me and Lived in...the Ancient Mali Empire: An Introduction to Civilizations Throughout Time Paperback*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016.



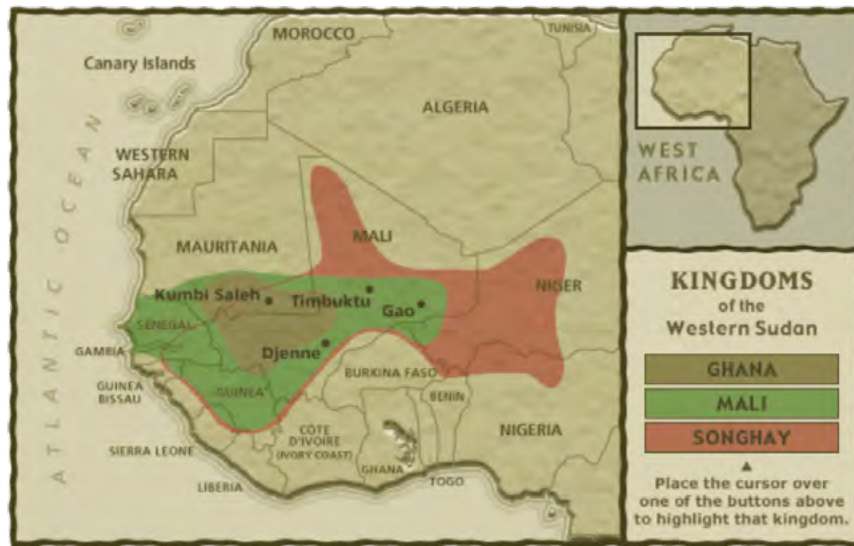
Map of Early African Civilizations



SOURCE: Cartwright, Mark. *Map of Ancient & Medieval Sub-Saharan African States*. Ancient History Encyclopedia. April 12, 2019. Accessed January 12, 2021. <https://www.ancient.eu/image/10453/map-of-ancient--medieval-sub-saharan-african-state>.



The Ghana Kingdom (about 700–1200 CE)



Ghana was West Africa's first powerful empire. It was located further north than today's nation of Ghana. Modern Ghana took its name in honor of ancient Ghana.

Ghana was known as the "land of gold." Ghanaians (the people of Ghana) invented ways to mine gold. They controlled three major gold fields. The kingdom became wealthy by trading gold throughout Africa. The kings of Ghana controlled the gold that was unearthed, and were called "lords of the gold." Visitors from Arab countries wrote about expensive gifts given by these kings to their neighbors and trading partners.

Ghanaians traded gold for salt from the Sahara Desert region. They needed salt for its nutrients and to preserve food. Other goods that were traded included copper, ivory, textiles and leather, herbs and spices and foods such as fish, rice, honey and kola nuts. These societies also traded enslaved people. The use of horses and camels at this time helped trade to grow.

The success of Ghana allowed its rulers to build power. They used iron to make weapons and commanded a large army. Arab visitors wrote of a force of 200,000 soldiers, including 40,000 archers. This may have been an exaggeration, but it shows that Ghana's military was impressive. Even though Ghana was powerful, the kingdom began to weaken in the 11th century CE. This happened after attacks by enemies, many wars and competition over trade routes. The climate also became drier over time and this damaged crops.

The Ghanaians did not have a writing system, so there is much we don't know about this great empire. However, archaeologists are still learning from a site they uncovered, called *Koumbi Saleh*. This ancient town may have been the capital of Ghana and home to more than 40,000 people. It contained stone houses, mosques and a palace complex. It also had a network of wells that provided water for drinking and irrigating crops. The remains at Koumbi Saleh prove that Ghana was one of the most complex and powerful civilizations of its time.

SOURCES:

Exploring Africa, "History of Africa During the Time of the Great West African Kingdoms," <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/activity-3-history-of-africa-during-the-time-of-the-great-west-african-kingdoms-expand>.

Khan Academy, "The Ghana Empire," <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/big-history-project/agriculture-civilization/first-cities-states/a/the-ghana-empire-1>.

National Museum of African Art, "Mali Empire and Djenné Figures," <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/resources/mali/index.htm>.



The Mali Kingdom (about 1235–670 CE)

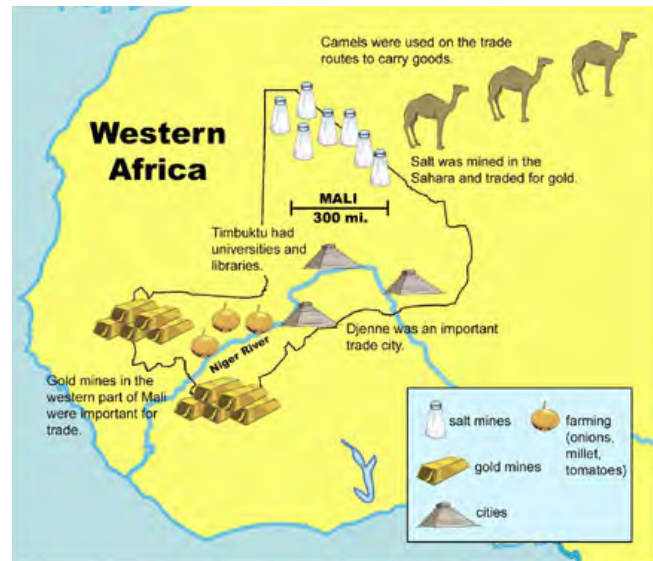
Mali means “place where the king lives.” Its first ruler was Sundiata Keita, or “lion prince.” He led a well-trained army to expand Ghana’s territory and power. Mali grew to include all of the land of Ghana plus gold fields to the south and additional land. It stretched more than 1,000 miles from east to west. It was the largest empire Africa had ever seen and the second largest in the world, after Mongolia.

Niani was Mali’s capital. It was protected by mountains and close to forests and a river. This made it a good place for trade. Mali continued to control the gold and salt trade started by Ghana. It also expanded trade to copper mines. Mali dominated caravans and trade routes—as many as 25,000 camels connected Mali to North Africa. Items that changed hands included ivory, horses, weapons, brass bowls and books. The capture of people to sell as enslaved labor also continued during this time.

Mali’s most famous king was Mansa Musa. He extended the power of Mali and doubled its territory. Mansa Musa taxed all goods that passed through his kingdom. He also bought goods at low prices and sold them at great profits. This helped to make him and the kingdom very rich.

During this time, the religion of Islam was spreading. Mansa Musa made a pilgrimage (journey) to Mecca, an important Islamic city in Saudi Arabia. He brought tens of thousands of people with him and as many as 100 camels, each carrying 300 pounds of gold. Mansa Musa gave away great gifts and impressed the people he met. This increased Mali’s power.

Mansa Musa invited teachers and architects to return with him to Mali. They built mosques and schools in important cities, such as Timbuktu. Great libraries were constructed to hold thousands of



books. The people of Mali were educated in many subjects, such as math, music, law, literature, history, geography and astronomy.

In Mali, cultural life was important. Artists produced pottery and sculpture. Dancers and musicians performed at religious festivals. Songs were written to honor important people, including warriors and hunters. The king even kept a royal orchestra.

Visitors to Mali commented on its justice system, safety and great amounts of food. Like most great empires, however, the Kingdom of Mali eventually began to collapse in the 1400s CE. It was weakened by civil wars, competition over trade and attacks by rivals, such as the Songhai Kingdom. By the mid-1600s CE, Mali was no longer an important power in Africa.

SOURCES:

Ancient History Encyclopedia, “Mali Empire,” https://www.ancient.eu/Mali_Empire.

Exploring Africa, “History of Africa During the Time of the Great West African Kingdoms,” <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/activity-3-history-of-africa-during-the-time-of-the-great-west-african-kingdoms-expand>.

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