

Unit 2: West African Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai

Directions: Using the following three readings, complete the following table. As you find the information in the passages, mark it! (Highlight, underline, circle, etc.) Be specific—I am looking for details!

	Ghana	Mali	Songhai
Government: What was the structure? Who held power?			
One important ruler: tell me about them!			
What was daily life like?			
Economy: How did the kingdoms make money? What did they trade/how?			
Two major achievements of the kingdom:			
How did the kingdom decline (lose power/fall)?			

The Kingdom of Ghana

A long, long time ago, the Kingdom of Ghana was made up of many villages. Each village had its own chief. One day, when all the chiefs were at a meeting, a beautiful stool dropped out of the sky and landed gently at the feet of one of the chiefs. The chief was wearing a wonderful robe of striped colors in orange, green, and brown.

"It is a sign," everyone said, "A sign to become one people."

That's how the people in the Kingdom of Ghana found their first king. The gods found him. All kings after that time wore beautiful robes, woven in stripes of orange, green, and brown.

Government: The king, ably assisted by his council of elders, headed the government. The kingdom was divided into districts. A district leader gently guided each district. They had laws that people mostly obeyed.

Army: Ghana was a great military power. Legend says the king commanded 200,000 warriors and 40,000 more with bows and arrows. That's a lot of manpower!

Daily Life: The people were farmers, miners, and artists. They made the most wonderful fabrics. They made designs with mud on dyed cloth that was then set in the sun. The sun baked the mud and created a design in the cloth. They had fresh fruit and sweet potatoes.

They had the Niger River, which provided water for farming, washing, and bathing, and fish and waterfowl to eat. They worked very hard, but their life was good.

Griots: The griots were the storytellers. Kids did not go to school, as we know school. Rather, people collected in the evening to hear the wonderful stories of the griots, which were responsible for passing on stories and traditions from one generation to another.

Gold Mines: The Kingdom of Ghana had lots of gold mines. They had so much gold that miners were allowed to keep all the gold dust they found. Only the nuggets had to be turned in to the king. Artists used gold to make beautiful statues and jewelry. They made gold drinking glasses, plates, and decorative objects. Ghana was dripping in gold. One of the wealthiest kings in all of Ghana was a man by the name of Tunka Manin. He used his money and power to bring Ghana to its height in the 1060s.

Gold for Salt: Thousands of years before Ghana became a kingdom; the Sahara was fertile and green. Rivers flowed through the Sahara. Over time, the rivers began to dry up. The land became a desert. During the time that the Sahara was fertile, the water created huge salt deposits underground. Salt was very important to these early people. They used salt as a seasoning and to store food. Ghana had many natural resources, but it did not have salt. The people of Ghana began to trade with the kingdoms to the north. The kingdoms to the north had lots of salt mines but did not have gold. The kingdoms made very good trading partners. They each had something the other wanted. Trades were even—an ounce of gold for an ounce of salt.

Tax: The King of Ghana was a very wise man. He did three things that he felt would protect his people. The first thing he did was charge a tax (a tribute, a tariff) on all people entering and leaving Ghana. This tax was paid in salt, iron, peacock feathers, fine silk, spices, and other luxury goods. In exchange, Ghanaian warriors kept the trade routes open and protected from raiders. As long as you paid your tax, traders could pass in peace. It was the tax that made Ghana rich.

The System of Silent Barter: The second thing the King of Ghana did was to establish a system of silent barter. Rather than meet and argue a price, gold would be left at a special place for the traders to take. If ample goods were not left in exchange, all trade ceased. The traders of Ghana did not speak the language of many of the new traders who crossed the Sahara via the Trans-Saharan Trade Routes. This system of silent barter worked very well. Traders were afraid to leave too little. They knew Ghana would stop trading. If anything, they left more than they normally would, to keep relations good and trade flowing.

Eventually though, several things happened to Ghana. A group called the Almoravids from the north invaded and weakened Ghana. They brought a lot of cattle with them. Their animals ate most of the grass in Ghana; they overgrazed. Finally, the people of Ghana became upset with the rulers and rebelled. By 1200, Ghana was gone.

The Kingdom of Mali

The Greatest Ruler: Mansa Musa

The empire of Mali had its heyday from about 1200CE through the end of the 1400s. This kingdom was similar to Ghana in that they were neighbors to each other, and they both traded gold and salt. This kingdom had a great start under the wise direction of Sundiata, the Lion King. His son, Wali, also ruled wisely. Mansa Musa, Sundiata's grandson, continued the family tradition. Under Mansa Musa, the Mali Empire doubled in size. But Mansa Musa accomplished much more than simple expansion. He put Mali on the map.

Under Mansa Musa, the empire was broken into provinces, each ruled by a governor. Each village had a mayor. Most villages followed the traditional religions of Africa. The people believed in many gods, in witch doctors, and in magic charms. Most village people could not read or write. They received education and training orally. They were very bright and creative people. They worked hard. They were not poor. The common people were given some luxury goods. Goods were given to the elders and distributed as they saw fit. Mansa Musa was a great believer in spreading wealth around.

The Kingdom of Mali was rich. The army guarded the gold mines. It also guarded the section of the Trans-Saharan Trade Route that passed by Mali. Legend says there were usually 90,000 warriors on foot, 10,000 warriors on camels, and a few on Arabian horses that worked together to keep the trade route safe for travel. Traders always stopped at Mali. They knew they would find safety, culture, and richly rewarding trade.

Like his grandfather Sundiata, Mansa Musa ruled for 25 years. He continued the tradition of religious freedom in Mali. He was a devout Muslim. Mansa Musa worshiped one god, Allah. He was the one who actually ordered an impressive university to be built at Timbuktu. He wanted scholars to come to Mali and they did.

The Muslim scholars who came to Mali were somewhat startled at the appearance of the people who called themselves Muslims. The climate was very hot. Rather than being heavily veiled in black garments, the women were unveiled and wore cool, colorful clothing. This was not the look to which they were accustomed. But Mansa Musa was such a good host and such a devout Muslim, that the scholars who came to the kingdom brought with them not only learning but also understanding. Having never left Mali, Mansa Musa really did not know that the appearance of his people was anything out of the ordinary in the Muslim world.

Mansa Musa did things you would expect a very rich king to do. When he left his palace, 300 guards and his special musicians who played music wherever they went always accompanied him. His people would gather along the road and chant, "Hail Mansa Musa, King of Mali!"

Since things were going so well at home, Mansa Musa decided now was the time to see the holy city of Mecca. Muslim law requires that all the faithful visit Mecca at least once. With a huge number of guards and attendants—along with camels carrying comforts, luxury, and bags full of gold nuggets—Mansa Musa set out across the desert toward Mecca. Along the way, everywhere he went, he freely gave away gold. You can imagine the excitement he generated as he traveled from one oasis to the next.

His caravan stopped in Cairo, Egypt. Word of his incredible wealth spread quickly through the city. Mansa Musa was amazed at how expensive things were. They were expensive because merchants increased their normal prices. Mansa Musa did not care.

Even though he had given away so much gold on the trip to Cairo, he had bagsful left to spend. And spend he did. Mansa Musa left so much gold behind him in Cairo that it was rumored it took 12 years for prices in Egypt to get back to normal. (This is probably an urban legend, but certainly it took a little time for things to get back to normal.)

He distributed so much gold on his way to Mecca that he had to borrow money for his return trip home. Everyone with money was eager to be of service to such a wealthy man. True to his nature, Mansa Musa repaid the loans most generously.

His journey took about a year. He traveled around 3000 miles by camel. No one attempted to take over his kingdom while he was gone. Mansa Musa was a very smart man. To reduce the likelihood of a takeover, he had brought with him on his trip most of the powerful people in his kingdom. He left the army in charge. They did a great job.

His people were impressed. They thought it amazing that he was willing to make such a long trip with so many dangers, just to see a faraway holy place. His trip had other results. Scholars poured into Timbuktu, making it the most prestigious university in the land. Trade became even more brisk.

Mansa Musa literally put Mali on the map—both European and Muslim maps.

Unfortunately, after Mansa Musa died, groups of people invaded his rich empire. Mansa Musa's son, Maghan, was not very good at fighting off the invaders. Soon, the kingdom of Mali was destroyed by these groups of people.

The Kingdom of Songhai

Songhai started as a fishing community. The people traded fish for the goods they wanted and needed. At one time, they were part of Mali. Mali tried to get them to pay taxes, but they never would. Songhai was always stubbornly independent. Mali let the people of Songhai get away with it because they wanted the fish.

As Mali weakened, Songhai started to take over. It was easy for them. Songhai was a strong Muslim kingdom. It was organized. It had a central government and a well-trained army. The people were not greedy. But they were proud. They were especially proud of Sunni Ali the Great (a hero to the Songhai people).

Sunni Ali the Great: Sunni Ali the Great (the new king) was a wonderful leader. He put warriors in canoes and started taking over city after city. He sent warriors to march on landlocked cities such as Timbuktu. Songhai kept growing until it grew into the largest kingdom in all of West Africa. It grew so big that it controlled the gold mines to the south and the salt mines to the north. That made it very powerful indeed. At its height, Songhai stretched over 2000 miles.

Trade: Trade flourished and made the Songhai rich. They exported gold, salt, kola nuts, and slaves. They imported textiles, horses, and luxury goods. Songhai was definitely a member of the slave trade. Children, women, and men would be sold into slavery without question or interest.

Daily life: Books were important. Any traders that brought books found them quickly purchased for vast amounts of gold. Doctors, judges, priests, and other educated men were maintained at the king's expense. These were important people. The homes of the nobles and kings were magnificent. The homes of the poor, however, were not. The leaders of Songhai did not spend time or money on the homes of workers. Privileged craftsmen were the exception. They lived quite well. Everyone else farmed the land and worked in the mines. Their life was not full of luxury.

Religion: The people of Songhai followed the African religions that included witch doctors, spirits, and magic. They believed in many gods. But the leaders of Songhai were Muslim. Their religion was Islam.

The End of the Kingdom of Songhai:

The downfall of Songhai was its wealth. Everyone wanted the gold mines. Morocco's Sultan (king) sent an army to Songhai in the late 1500s. The Moroccan army had cannons and muskets. The Songhai army had spears and knives. In spite of this, Morocco could not conquer Songhai, although it did level the cities. The fighting continued long after the government buildings were destroyed.

After about 10 years, the Sultan of Morocco lost interest, abandoned his army in Songhai, and forgot about them. The Moroccan soldiers who were left behind were either killed or were absorbed into the local Songhai population. Even though Morocco did not really win the war, it totally destroyed Songhai, along with the cities and rest stops in the region that made it of interest to the traders who traveled the Trans-Saharan Trade Route. Although some of the people survived, the Kingdom of Songhai was no more.