

Mansa Musa:

African King of Gold

A Unit of Study for Grades 7–9

National Center for History in the Schools
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TEACHER BACKGROUND

I. Unit Overview

One of the greatest and most far-reaching empires of the later middle ages was in West Africa. The kingdom of Mali impressed both the Muslim and the Christian worlds with its wealth. One of Mali's greatest leaders, the emperor Mansa Musa, awakened the world to Mali's power on his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 when he spent and distributed so much gold that it deflated its price in Cairo for the next twelve years.

Several Arab scholars were so impressed by this man that they followed him back to Mali to investigate the empire. The writings of these scholars serve as the primary source documents for this unit. Through the examination, interpretation and synthesis of these writings, students will be able to analyze the people and culture of Mali, the role of the emperor, and the character of Mansa Musa himself.

The investigation of African kingdoms is crucial to a more complete understanding of world history. For too long Africa has been treated as the backwater of history with students and teachers alike having limited knowledge of this area. It will be a fascinating and enlightening project for students to learn about an African who fourteenth-century Europeans described as "the richest and most noble king in all the land."

This unit challenges the idea that Africa was "a dark continent" and unknown to the outside world before the arrival of Europeans. It will show that strong, well-organized states existed in Africa long before European colonialism. Here, as in medieval Europe, the kings' strength and respectability heavily depended on the material wealth they possessed. They shared this wealth among their loyal followers, (often chiefs, lords, or military leaders), who in turn shared it among those they ruled or commanded.

It is important also in presenting this topic to remind students that the rule of the kings was by no means democratic as we understand democracy today. Any differences between various reigns were due to the personality or the unique forces in operation within individual societies. The focus should thus be on critical appreciation rather than blind glorification of the past, as the past was not flawless.

II. Unit Context

This unit would fit best during a study of the late middle ages (1300–1517). It would be most effective if it were placed in the chronological framework of events occurring in Europe, the Mediterranean region, and the Muslim world and not set apart as a topic exclusive to itself. If time permits, an investigation into both the kingdoms of Ghana and Songhay, which flourished before and after Mali, would be helpful, although the unit can be taught alone. It is essential, however, that students first study the rise of Islam since Mali was an empire whose ruling class had converted to Islam.

This unit will also help students understand the spread of Islam beyond the Middle East, as well as the patterns of long-distance trade that linked Mali to the wider Afro-Eurasian world.

III. Correlation to National History Standards

Mansa Musa: African King of Gold provides teaching materials that address the National Standards for World History in *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 5: Intensified Hemispheric Interactions, 1000–1500**. Lessons within this unit specifically address **Standard 4A: The Growth of States, Towns, and Trade in Sub-Saharan African between the 11th and 15th Centuries**.

This unit likewise integrates a number of specific Historical Thinking Skills including: reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration (**Standard 1: Chronological Thinking**); draw upon visual and literary sources (**Standard 2: Historical comprehension**); formulate historical questions and obtain historical data from a variety of sources (**Standard 4: Historical Research**); and marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances (**Standard 5: Historical Issues—Analysis and Decision Making**).

IV. Unit Objectives

- ◆ Understand the importance of geography in the study of history.
- ◆ Read and interpret primary source documents by Arab scholars who visited or learned about Mali in the fourteenth century.
- ◆ Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations.

IV. Introduction to *Mansa Musa: African King of Gold*

The great political problem in the western region of the Western Sudan was how to bring peace and order into the confusion that had followed the collapse of Ghana. The problem was tackled, and largely solved, by a Mali emperor whose name became more famous even than that of Sundiata, the king who established the new empire of Mali. This was Mansa Kankan Musa, who carried Mali to the height of its power and enjoyed a reputation at home and abroad as an able and pious king. Mansa was his title and means “ruler” or “sultan.” Musa is Arabic for “Moses.”

Mansa Musa came to power around 1312. By the time of his death in 1337, Mali had grown into one of the largest empires in the world.¹ What Mansa Musa accomplished was to repeat the success of Ghana on a more ambitious scale. He already had firm control of the trade routes to those lands. Now he brought the lands of the Middle Niger under his control and enclosed the key trading cities of Timbuktu and Gao within his empire. He imposed his rule on southern Saharan trading cities like Walata, and pushed his armies northward until their influence was felt as far as the salt deposits of Taghaza in the north central desert. He sent them eastward beyond Gao to the very frontiers of Hausaland (today northern Nigeria) and westward down the Gambia and Senegal River valleys to the Atlantic Ocean.

Through twenty-five successful years Mansa Musa progressively enclosed a large part of the central and western regions of the Western Sudan within a single system of law and order. He did this so well that Ibn Battuta, traveling through Mali some twelve years after the great emperor's death, could find “complete and general safety in the land.”

Muslim merchant groups, notably the Dyula and Wangara grew in strength with the widening power of Mali. Their trading operations began to spread into many parts of West Africa, pushing their enterprises far down into the forest lands as well as across the plains of the north.

This was also a period of Islamic expansion in the Western Sudan. Unlike the rulers of Ghana, Mansa Musa accepted the new religion. Many members of his royal court, as well as provincial chiefs and officers, followed him. So did some

*The year of Musa's death is often given as 1332. But the great North African historian, Ibn Khaldun, whose writings remain the best source of information on the dates of the rulers of Mali, has recorded that Musa was still alive in 1337.

Teacher Background

of their subjects. Other rulers and peoples remained loyal to their own religions, but Islam steadily widened its influence. More and more West Africans went on pilgrimages to Mecca. More and more North Africans and Egyptians visited Mali. Trade and Islam grew together, and both prospered.

Mansa Musa himself made a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. His journey through Egypt was long remembered with amazement because Musa took with him so much gold and gave away so many golden gifts that “the people of Cairo earned incalculable sums.” So lavish was Musa with his gifts that he upset the value of goods on the Cairo market. Gold became more plentiful and therefore less valued, so prices rose accordingly. The North African scholar al-Umari, who lived in Cairo a few years after Mansa Musa’s visit declared that of all the Muslim rulers of West Africa Musa was “the most powerful, the richest, the most fortunate, the most feared by his enemies, and the most able to do good to those around him.” Behind these words of praise one may glimpse the power and reputation that Mali drew from its control of a very wide region of trade in precious goods such as salt, ivory, kola nuts, and especially gold.

Under Mansa Musa, Mali ambassadors and royal agents were established in Morocco, Egypt, and elsewhere. North African and Egyptian scholars visited Mali’s capital. On returning from pilgrimage, Mansa Musa brought with him a number of learned men from Egypt. One of them, called al-Saheli, is said to have designed new mosques at Gao and Timbuktu and built a palace for the emperor. The fashion of building houses of brick became popular among wealthy people in the cities of the Western Sudan.

Niani, the capital of this empire, has long since disappeared. Yet as late as the sixteenth century, the Moroccan traveler Leo Africanus could still describe it as a place of “six thousands hearths,” and its inhabitants as “the most civilized, intelligent, and respected” of all the peoples of the Western Sudan.

V. Lesson Plans

1. The Geography of Mali and Africa
2. Mansa Musa and Mali
3. Historical Bias
4. Student Projects

LESSON ONE

THE GEOGRAPHY OF MALI AND AFRICA

A. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To correctly label a map of fourteenth-century Africa.
- ◆ To be able to recognize the kingdom of Mali and understand how it relates to the geography of Europe and the Middle East.
- ◆ To interpret the map and begin to draw conclusions about the kingdom of Mali based on information in the map.

B. LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Tell the students that they are going to be working on a map of Africa with the goal of placing the **Dramatic Moment** (Mansa Musa's journey to Mecca) into a geographical framework. Use the **Teacher Resource Map** on page 11 as a resource
2. Hand out **Student Handout One**, the blank map of Africa. Either draw a matching, unlabeled map on the board or create an overhead transparency.
3. Using the list below, call on students to see if any can correctly identify locations. Label correct identifications on your map while asking the students to do the same on their copies.

Sahara Desert

Atlantic Ocean

Black Sea

Europe

Red Sea

Nile River

Mediterranean Sea

Egypt

Arabian Peninsula

4. Add to your map: the kingdom of Mali, the Niger River, and three important cities in Mali (Timbuktu, Gao and Jenne). Have students do the same.

Lesson One

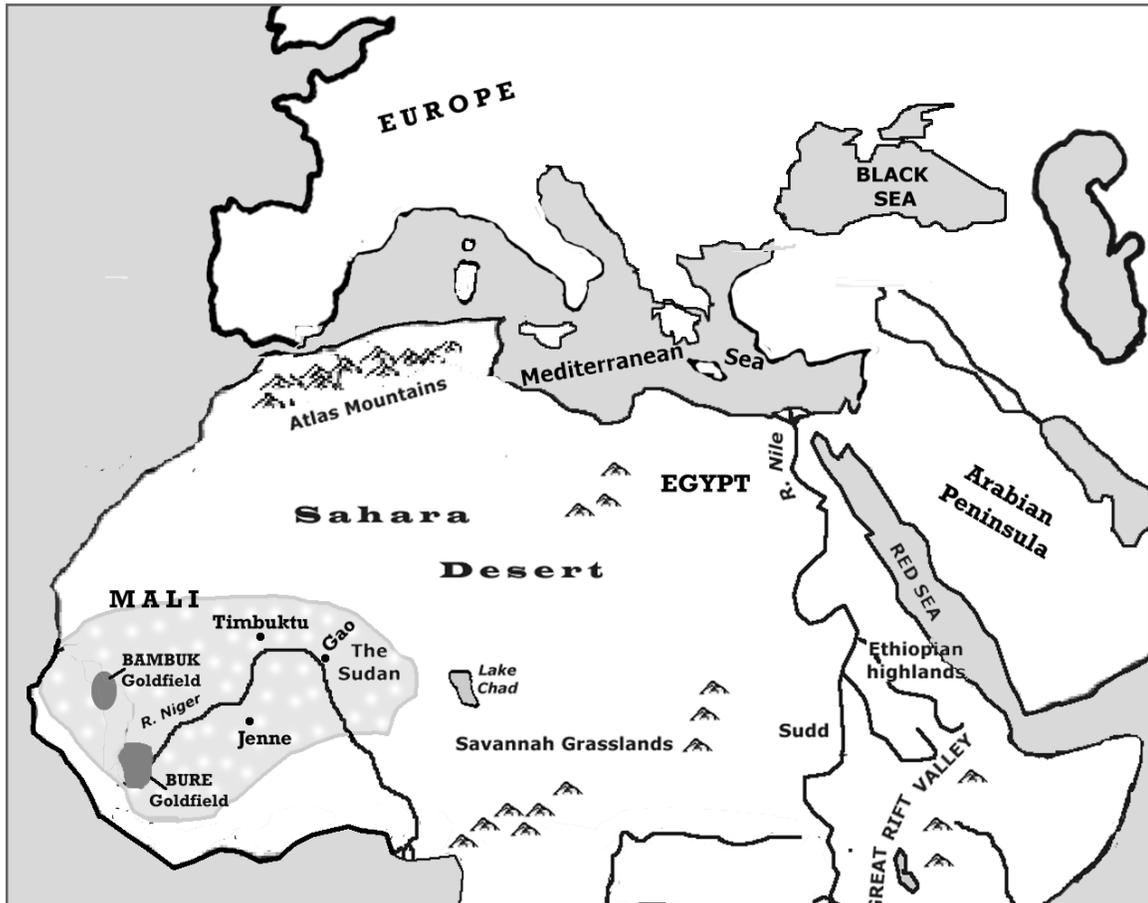
Questions

- a. What connection is there between the location of the cities and the location of the Niger River?
 - b. What kind of comparison in size can you make between the kingdom of Mali and countries of Europe you've studied?
 - c. What conclusions can you begin to draw about Mali?
 - d. How might these cities be important to Mali? [trading centers on the Mediterranean Sea]
 - e. What geographical feature separates them from Mali? [the Sahara]
 - f. How were people able to cross the Sahara Desert?
5. Draw in the most common trade routes and have the students label them on their maps.
 6. Label the gold fields of Bambuk and Bure and have the students do the same. Ask the following questions and let the students study their maps to see if they can draw the connection themselves:
 - a. Look at where Timbuktu is located: Why do you think the city was an important trade center? What might Timbuktu be a convenient place for? [A transfer point from the desert caravans to the boats of the Niger, a port of the "desert ocean." Comparisons can be drawn if the students are at all familiar with a modern port at which containers are transferred from ships to trucks and trains.]
 7. At this point you can do either of the following activities based on your own class and the resources available to you:
 - a. Give students an atlas which has a graphic-relief map of Africa and ask them to color in the rest of the continent based on that graphic relief map.

- b. Ask students to turn their maps into limited political maps of the fourteenth century by shading each of the following area a different color.

Kingdom of Mali
Christian Europe
Islamic States
Middle East

8. To close the lesson, remind the students that they will need this map every day of this unit. It would be a good idea to give a short quiz on this map to open the class the next day.



Equator



Map by Marian M. Olivas

Inset map from: Margaret Shinnie, *Ancient African Kingdoms* (New York: New American Library, 1970, c1965), p.84.

