

Lesson Summary

Kingdoms of West Africa

After early farmers moved from the Sahara to more fertile lands to the south, they began to produce more food than they needed, or a **surplus**. They were then able to trade surplus food for goods from other villages. A trade network developed that eventually connected Africa with Asia and Europe. Cities developed along the trade routes.

Much of the trade exchanged gold for salt, each a valuable product, or **commodity**. Gold was common in West Africa, while salt was plentiful in the Sahara. However, people needed salt to stay healthy and preserve food. In fact, traders might exchange one pound of salt for one pound of gold.

About A.D. 800, the ancient West African kingdom of **Ghana** became a center of trade. From there, the king controlled the salt and gold trade. In addition, the king administered justice and other government activities, and kept the peace. Ghana was very prosperous and attracted Muslims from the north. They brought new ideas about military technology and business. Later, Ghana was swallowed up by a new power, the rising kingdom of Mali.

About 1235, **Sundiata** established the empire of **Mali**. He gained control of trade routes, the gold mining regions, and the salt supplies. **Mansa Musa**, Mali's greatest ruler, came to power about 1312. He fostered justice and religious freedom. His pilgrimage to Mecca created ties to Muslim states and brought Islamic scholars to Mali to provide religious instruction. After Mali weakened, another kingdom, Songhai, developed in West Africa. After 1492, Songhai's emperor Askia Muhammad established a Muslim dynasty, expanded the territory, and improved the government. He strengthened ties to other Muslim states and built mosques and schools. However, internal conflicts weakened the empire, which was conquered by the sultan of Morocco around 1591.

Smaller societies, such as Benin, also flourished in the region from A.D. 500 to 1500. In the rain forests of the Guinea coast in the 1300s, the people of Benin built farming villages. They also traded pepper, ivory, and slaves to neighbors. At the same time, the Hausa built clay-walled cities. These cities grew into commercial centers, where artisans produced goods, and merchants traded with Arabs. Many Hausa rulers were women.

Review Questions

- The king of Ghana controlled the trade of which two commodities?
- What were Mansa Musa's contributions to Mali?