

AFRICA DOES HAVE ITS OWN HISTORY: Trade, Islam and the West  
African Empires  
(Meeting Pennsylvania Middle School Standards)

Western Historians traditionally ignored the African past; little importance was given to its pre-colonial societies. It is only recently that State Curriculum requirements include substantive discussion of pre-colonial Africa.

There are two reasons for this: first, Western civilization has historically thought of Africans as inferior and unworthy of cultural consideration, often denying Africa an indigenous history and assuming its history began with the coming of the Europeans. Secondly, most ancient African societies did not develop systems of writing. Western scholars traditionally belittled the historical validity of archeological findings and oral traditions. Yet these findings and oral histories combined with the written works of Arab scholars expose a rich and complex African heritage.

My workshop is based on the premise that to understand the African past it is necessary to examine African civilization before colonization. The establishment of a network of trading cities along the north-south trans-Saharan routes ultimately gave rise to the development of larger political entities. It was the desire to control the wealth associated with the trans-Saharan trade that probably stimulated the development of the great medieval empires of West Africa.

By exploring the medieval kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhay (the depth depends on time made available for this program) other factors can be identified: from geography to leadership. Ghana was a thriving center of trade in the Western Sudan that boasted advanced technology and a sophisticated social and political organization. The Mali Empire was larger than Western Europe and controlled the trade of both gold and salt. Sundiata, Mansa Musa and Abubakar were leaders who created strong political states. Sonni Ali the Great led the rise of Songhay in the fifteenth century. The spread of Islam intensifies trade between West Africa and North Africa; while the expansion of trade, particularly gold, fosters links between Africa and Europe.

This two-hour workshop could fit into your state guidelines by following the study of ancient civilizations or be integrated with a study of the Middle Ages, the rise of Islam or the development of long-distance trade. The full day workshop would help identify teaching materials and address historical thinking standards including – data from historical maps, analyze multiple causation and interrogate historical data.

A separate workshop could be provided focused on the kingdoms of Ife and Benin as well as the nature of Art, Culture and Religion among the Yoruba people and compared with the description in Jane Rupert's "[African Mask](#)."

An overview of the topics that could be covered is provided below. Please note that a two-hour workshop would cover less than an all-day workshop. If Springside is interested in either, I would provide a more detailed outline. In either case, I can provide maps, class activities, vocabulary lists as your staff indicates its needs.

### **Trade, Islam and the West African Empires:**

- I Introduction: The sources of evidence
- II. Medieval Africa: The geographic, political, economic, religious and social Structures of Ghana and Mali (Songhai could be added). Empire of Ghana and Empire of Mali.
- III. They arose on the savanna in the Niger River Valley. Trade connected two vegetation zones: The West African rainforest sold gold and slaves; the Sahara Desert of North Africa sold salt. The two met on the savanna at Timbutu. The Crossroads: “where the camel met the canoe”.
- IV. The importance of family, specialized jobs and regional trade. The family: Matrilineal family, extended family, respect for elders, ancestor worship, animism, divination. Artisans, iron-working, the blacksmith, division of labor, Hereditary occupations, master craftsmen. (Contrasted perhaps with the Yoruba as described in Jane Rupert’s *“African Mask”*. *In an all day workshop, four hours could be applied to these topics and two to Ife and Benin, Yoruba Culture, Art and Religion.*)
- V. Centralized government: the black kingdoms, dynasty, hereditary king. Tunka Menin (1037-1075 A.D.), Sundiata Keita – “The Lion King”; Mansa Musa ((1306-1332) -- Pilgrimage to Mecca. Places: Kumbi Saleh – Jenne –Timbuktu (Askia Muhammad Toure -(1493-1529) – Songhay, if there is enough time)
- VI. Cultural Exchange: the spread of Islam – How the trans-Saharan caravan trade allowed Muslim merchants to spread the religion of Islam. The influence of Islamic beliefs, ethics and law. Islam changed the religious and cultural characteristics of West Africa. Religion - Building of Universities - centralization of military and political power; the provision of written language.
- VII. Griot: the oral tradition