Routes of Power

Compare how geography, trade, and ideas shaped three West African kingdoms.

SS24.8.5 "Compare the African kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, including cultures, economic systems, geography, religions, and slave trade..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB As you read, underline geographic features and the ways they helped trade or growth. Circle examples of beliefs or learning moving between places.

Rivers, Caravans, and Kingdoms

1 Across West Africa, the Sahara Desert separated farming lands from North Africa, but camel caravans crossed it. Ghana grew near the upper Senegal and Niger Rivers, where rulers taxed traders moving gold north and salt south. Farther east, the Niger River supported farms and boat travel around Mali and later Songhai. Its great bend helped connect inland towns with desert routes. Caravans also carried enslaved people, often captives of war, across the Sahara. Rivers and desert routes made trade a source of power for all three kingdoms.

2 These kingdoms did not share a single culture or faith. Ghana's rulers welcomed Muslim merchants, but many people kept local religious practices. In Mali, Islam became important at court, while local traditions continued. Mansa Musa, Mali's ruler, traveled to Mecca in 1324 with a large caravan that displayed Mali's wealth. He supported mosques and Islamic study at home. Trade and travel carried Arabic writing and Islamic ideas into West Africa, while local languages remained in everyday use. Merchants and teachers connected communities even when their beliefs differed.

3 Under Mali, Timbuktu grew into a center where merchants exchanged goods and scholars studied and copied books. Scholars also traveled between Timbuktu and North Africa, sharing texts and ideas in both directions. Later, Songhai controlled Timbuktu and much of the Niger trade; its rulers collected taxes and supported a powerful army. Some Songhai rulers backed Islamic learning, though many people kept local beliefs. The city linked West Africa to wider networks of scholarship as well as trade, showing that a trade center could spread culture beyond its own region.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did geography help Ghana gain wealth, and how did it help Mali and Songhai?

2. Compare the place of Islam and local beliefs in Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

3. How did Mansa Musa's actions affect Mali's reputation and its cultural connections?

4. Which spread ideas beyond West Africa more directly: Timbuktu's traveling scholars or Songhai's taxes on Niger trade? Use passage evidence.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a six-sentence museum label comparing Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. Explain how geography helped trade, how beliefs or learning spread, and why the trade in enslaved people makes this history more complex; finish with your judgment about whether trade or learning made the longer-lasting connection, supported by evidence.

ANSWER KEY

Routes of Power

GRADE 8 · SS24.8.5

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

As you read, underline geographic features and the ways they helped trade or growth. Circle examples of beliefs or learning moving between places. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did geography help Ghana gain wealth, and how did it help Mali and Songhai?	**Ghana taxed gold and salt traders using routes across the Sahara. The Niger River supported farms and boat travel around Mali and Songhai and connected inland towns to desert routes.**
2	Compare the place of Islam and local beliefs in Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.	**Ghana welcomed Muslim merchants while many people kept local beliefs. Islam was important at Mali's court, and some Songhai rulers backed Islamic learning, but local beliefs continued in both kingdoms.**
3	How did Mansa Musa's actions affect Mali's reputation and its cultural connections?	**His caravan to Mecca displayed Mali's wealth, while his support for mosques and Islamic study strengthened its ties to Islamic learning.**
4	Which spread ideas beyond West Africa more directly: Timbuktu's traveling scholars or Songhai's taxes on Niger trade? Use passage evidence.	**Timbuktu's scholars did. They traveled between the city and North Africa, sharing texts and ideas; the passage links Songhai's taxes to trade, not directly to spreading ideas.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Ghana gained wealth by taxing caravans crossing the Sahara, while Mali and Songhai used the Niger River to connect farms and markets. All three benefited from trade routes, but their rulers handled Islam differently. Ghana welcomed Muslim merchants, Mansa Musa supported Islamic study in Mali, and some Songhai rulers supported it too. Scholars traveling between Timbuktu and North Africa shared books and ideas. The trade networks that built wealth also carried enslaved people and caused suffering. I think learning made a longer-lasting connection because scholars shared ideas beyond the kingdoms' borders.

Accept other supported comparisons and judgments in the museum label. Look for a geographic cause, a specific example of cultural exchange, and an accurate acknowledgment of the trade in enslaved people.