West African Gold and Salt Kingdoms

Directions: Examine the documents below and answer the questions that follow.

Scarcity, Supply, and Demand

Scarcity, the lack of a particular resource, exists because the world's resources are limited. The scarcity of resources affects everyone, but not always in the same way. For example, scarcity benefits those who can supply a desired limited resource, if those who demand the resource can pay the price.

Scarcity, Supply, and Demand in History
Ghana was a kingdom rich in gold—so rich that even the ruler's dogs wore gold-plated collars. This abundance of wealth lured traders from North Africa, where gold was scarce but in high demand. In exchange for the gold, the North Africans offered salt, which the people of West Africa needed in their diets to survive.

Ghana's kings gained wealth and power from the gold-salt trade. Major trade routes ran through the kingdom of Ghana, which enabled Ghana's kings to control and collect taxes on the trade. In addition, all of Ghana's gold was the kings' property. They kept all gold nuggets for themselves but allowed gold dust to be traded. In this way, the kings controlled the supply of gold and its price.

Scarcity, Supply, and Demand Today
Consider how scarcity affects the world today. What countries benefit from supplying and controlling a limited resource just as Ghana did in the past? The world's oil-rich countries are a good example. These countries have greatly increased their wealth and global influence over the past 100 years by filling the demand for a single valuable resource that cannot be found in other places. As you study world history, look for ways that scarcity of resources affects supply and demand.

Explain: How are some people able to benefit economically from scarcity?

► Raw salt is often formed into slabs for ease of transport. Here, a worker in a market in Mopti, Mali, in West Africa stacks slabs of salt to sell.

Source: “Kingdoms of West Africa”, Susan Ramirez, World History: Human Legacy

1. How was the Empire of Ghana able to benefit economically from scarcity?
2. Based on this document, what were two results of the Trans-Saharan Gold-Salt Trade in West Africa?

Mali emerged against the backdrop of a declining of Ghana under the leadership of Sundiata of the Keita clan. But the region he took over had a past rich in trade and powerful rulers. Sundiata Keita rose to power by defeating the king of the Sosso - Soumaoro, known as the Sorcerer King, in 1235. He then brought all the Mandinke clan rulers (or Mansas) under his leadership, declaring himself Mansa over all. He took the city of Timbuktu from the Berbers (nomads of the Sahara), transforming it into a substantial city, a focus for trade and scholarship. A significant portion of the wealth of the Empire derived from the Bure goldfields in the south. The first capital, Niani, was built close to this gold mining area. Mali also acquired control over the salt mines in the north. The people of the south...
needed salt for their diet, but it was extremely rare. For that reason, salt was as valuable, if not more valuable than gold in Sub-Saharan Africa.


3. Who was Sundiata? How did he become the Mansa of Mali?

4. Why was salt so valuable in Sub-Saharan Africa?

5. How do you think the Malian acquisition of northern salt mines impacted their economic strength? Explain.

Malians in the Americas?

Mali reached its peak in the 14th century. While some scholars doubt these accounts, one ruler, Abubakar II, goes down in history as the king who wanted to cross the Atlantic Ocean, and may have reached the Americas. While there are no accounts of Malians returning, the next king who came to power, Mansa Musa, speaks of the voyage.

So Abubakar equipped 200 ships filled with men and the same number equipped with gold, water, and provisions, enough to last them for years...they departed and a long time passed before anyone came back. Then one ship returned and we asked the captain what news they brought. He said, “Yes, Oh Sultan, we travelled for a long time until there appeared in the open sea a river with a powerful current...the other ships went on ahead, but when they reached that place, they did not return and no more was seen of them...As for me, I went about at once and did not enter the river.” The Sultan got ready 2,000 ships, 1,000 for himself and the men whom he took with him, and 1,000 for water and provisions. He left me [in charge] and embarked on the Atlantic Ocean with his men. That was the last we saw of him and all those who were with him. And so, I became king in my own right.”

Source: Mansa Musa, talking to Syrian scholar Al-Umari

6. Based on the primary source, do you think Malians traveled to the Americas? Explain.

Mansa Musa: Muslim King of Mali

The greatest ruler of Mali was Mansa Musa, who came to the throne in 1312. He expanded Mali’s borders westward to the Atlantic Ocean and pushed northward to conquer many cities. During his 25-year reign, Mansa Musa worked to ensure peace and order in his empire. He converted to Islam and based his system of justice on the Quran. However, he did not impose Islam on the people, but promoted religious freedom and tolerance.

Source: Elizabeth Gaynor Ellis, “Kingdoms of West Africa”, World History
Ibn Battuta recorded that in Mansa Musa’s court, the Shariah (Islamic religious teaching) was rather informally practiced in matters of marriage. He records that Ibn Amir Hajib, a member of the Mamluk court, noted how Mansa Musa strictly observed prayer and knew the Qur’an, but had maintained “the custom that if one of his subjects had a beautiful daughter, he brought her to the king's bed without marriage.” Ibn Amir Hajib informed Mansa Musa that this was not permitted under Islamic law, to which Mansa Musa replied, “Not even to kings?” Ibn Amir Hajib said, “Not even to kings.” Henceforth Mansa Musa refrained from the practice.

**Source:** Aisha R Masterson, “Mansa Musa: The Hajj that Changed History”

7. What method of imperial consolidation did Mansa Musa employ in his empire?

8. How did Mansa Musa’s practice of Islam evolve over time?

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Mansa Musa observed Islamic tradition by making his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324-1325. His party formed a gargantuan caravan that included thousands of soldiers, attendants, subjects, and slaves as well as a hundred camels carrying satchels of gold. Mansa Musa bestowed lavish gifts on those who hosed him along the way, and during his three-month visit to Cairo (the capital of Egypt), he distributed so much gold that the metal’s value declined by as much as 25 percent on local markets.

**Source:** Jerry H Bentley, “Islamic Kingdoms and Empries”, Traditions and Encounters

It is said that he brought with him 14,000 slave girls for his personal service. The members of his entourage proceeded to buy Turkish and Ethiopia slave girls, singing girls and garments, so that the rate of the gold dinar fell by six dirhams. Having presented his gift he set off with the caravan.

**Source:** Egyptian Historian Al-Marquizi

9. What economic impact did the Hajj of Mansa Musa have on Egypt? Explain WHY that happened?

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The City of Timbuktu

... One of the chief trade centers for salt in the ancient world was the fabled city of Timbuktu. Located on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert, the city thrived on profits from the salt trade.... The salt trade made the city prosperous; in Africa, salt ranked with gold and slaves in value. For merchants to risk camels over hundreds of miles of burning sand, the profits must have been enormous. Nor did the city squander [waste] its wealth. Timbuktu's salt
trade supported schools and libraries; merchants lived in fine houses; the king paid handsome salaries to judges, doctors, and clerics—all from profits on the three-hundred-pound salt cargo that each camel carried....

Source: Robert Kraske, Crystals of Life: The Story of Salt, Doubleday & Company

Through his pilgrimage, Mansa Musa showed his devotion to Islam. He also forged new diplomatic and economic ties with other Muslim states. In addition, he brought back scholars, architects, and teachers who helped promote Islamic education in Mali. In fact, an Islamic university was built in Timbuktu, which attracted students from far and wide. This movement of wealth, people, and ideas increased Mali’s renown.

Source: Elizabeth Gaynor Ellis, “Kingdoms of West Africa”, World History

10. What are two ways the profits of the salt trade affected the city of Timbuktu?

11. What are two ways the hajj of Mansa Musa affected the city of Timbuktu?

12. Mansa Musa enjoyed widespread reputation as the wealthiest king in the world. On this map, prepared in 1375 by a cartographer from the Mediterranean island of Majorca, Mansa Musa holds a nugget about the size of a grapefruit. What does this illustration reveal about the image of West Africa in the Mediterranean world?