

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Middle Ages: Africa

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

North Africa is dominated by Earth's largest desert, the Sahara, nearly a quarter of which is blanketed by sand sheets and dunes. While desert conditions can be difficult for humans, this is not the case for the camels indigenous to desert areas throughout the world.

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Camels are able to chew and digest cacti's spikes and all. They can also survive several months without food and for over a week without water. Their long eyelashes, closable nostrils, and padded hooves protect them from heat and sand. These unique adaptations, as well as camels' capacity for traveling long distances while carrying heavy loads, make them excellent pack animals.

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Around 300 CE, the Berbers, a nomadic people of North Africa, domesticated the camel, revolutionizing travel and transport in the region. Thanks to this breakthrough, camel caravans could now transport goods across the Sahara, leading to the vast expansion of the trans-Saharan trade network.

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2. b'

West Africa was abundant in gold. With the expanded trans-Saharan trade network, this gold could be exported in exchange for other goods. The trading itself was conducted by the nomadic Berbers, who resold the gold (and other goods) across Africa and into Egypt. As the trans-saharan trade network grew, however, so did incidents of theft. To protect caravans full of goods, West African rulers established military forces, marking the emergence of the Ghana Empire.

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The Ghana Empire, which controlled all access to the region's goldfields and collected tax revenues on trade, grew extremely wealthy. Its capital city, Koumbi Saleh, boasted a luxurious palace and a sophisticated well and irrigation system an impressive achievement for such a dry region. The empire flourished for centuries, but by the 11th century, it was in decline.

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3. b'

As the Ghana Empire declined, the Mali Empire emerged, peaking in the 1300s under the reign of King Mansa Musa. The empire placed a high tax on trade coming in and out and had exclusive rights to all the gold in the region.

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In addition to gold, Mali was rich in salt, which was so plentiful that in some towns, slabs of it were used to build houses. As a vital part of the human diet, salt was also exported to sub-Saharan Africa the region south of the Sahara desert where it was hard to come by naturally. Pound for pound, it was literally worth its weight in gold.

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The wealth of the Mali Empire became widely known as a result of Mansa Musa's legendary pilgrimage to Mecca. More than 60,000 people went with him, along with nearly 100 camels, each carrying hundreds of pounds of gold. Mansa Musa gave away so much gold along the way that its value depreciated for over a decade.

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The trans-Saharan trade network led to the sharing of cultures, languages, and ideas across medieval Africa, most notably Islam. Berber merchants adopted the faith following exposure to Arab traders. Rulers of the Ghana and Mali Empires followed suit in part, because they recognized the advantages of sharing a religion with their trade partners. To avoid alienating their non-Muslim subjects, these kings often blended traditional African religious practices with Islamic practices. In East Africa, Swahilis also began adopting and adapting the faith, blending Islam with their own traditions. Again, this was for both religious and economic reasons.

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Study of the Quran, Islam's foundational text, brought literacy to Africa, and as the faith spread, mosques were built across the continent. On Mansa Musa's return trip home after his pilgrimage to Mecca, he is said to have ordered a mosque to be built every Friday (the Muslim holy day) wherever his caravan stopped.

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