

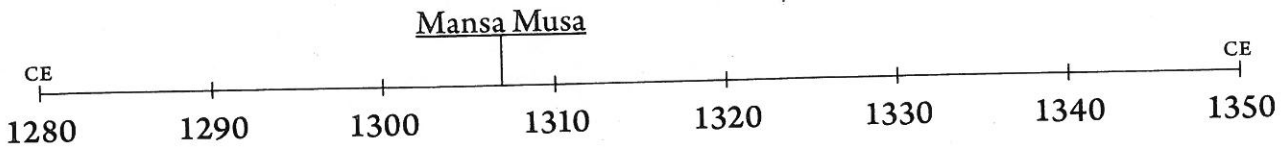
LESSON 6: MANSA MUSA

VOCABULARY

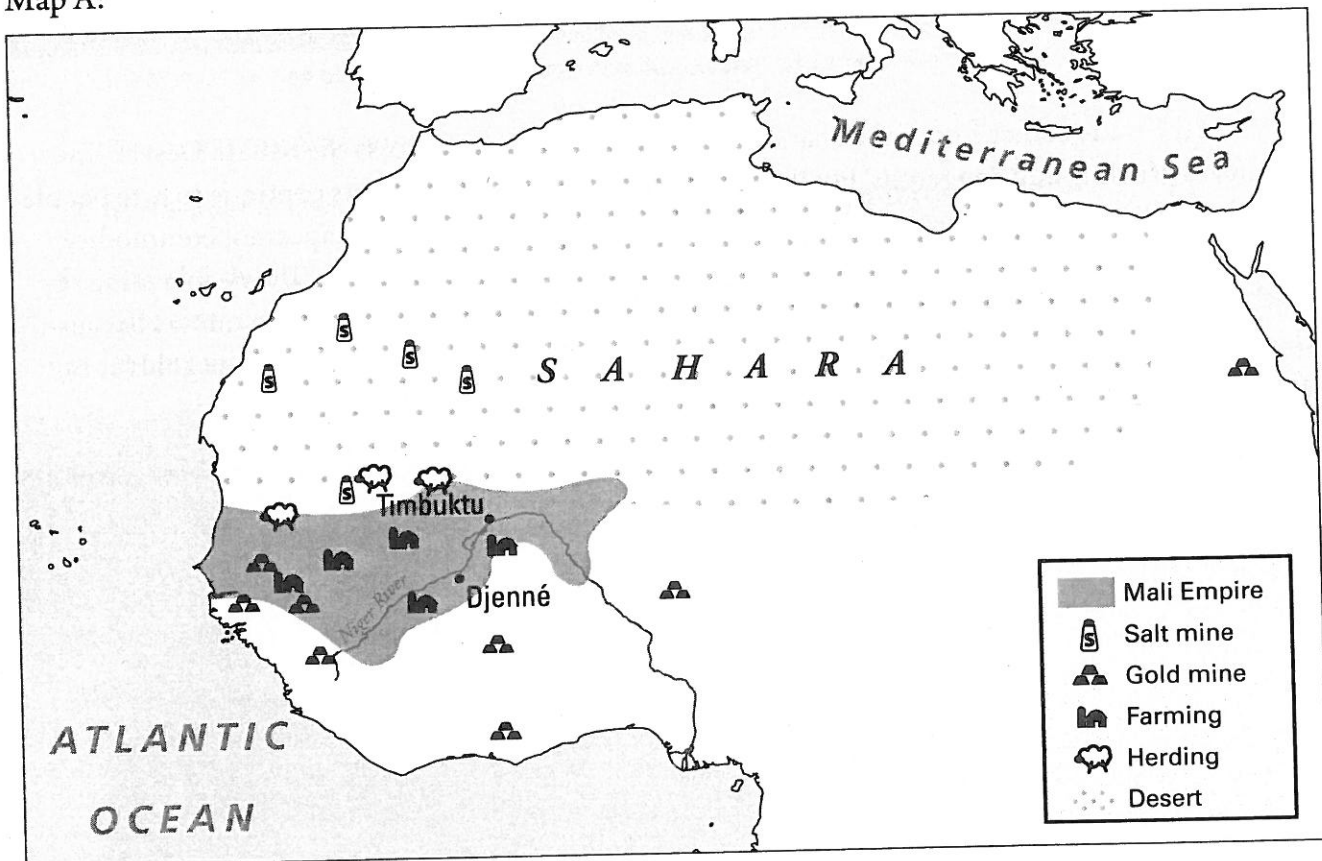
- Allah—Arabic for “God”
- animism—the belief that plants, animals, and inanimate objects have spiritual souls
- Hajj—Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca
- Islam—religion founded by Muhammad; its members worship one god (Allah) and follow the teachings of the Koran
- Mali—powerful West African kingdom in the early 1300s
- Mansa Musa—ruler of the Mali Empire in the early 1300s
- Mecca—holiest city for Muslims, because Muhammad was born there
- Muhammad—prophet who founded the religion of Islam
- Muslim—follower of the religion of Islam
- Sahara Desert—extremely hot, dry area in northern Africa with very little vegetation

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DECISIONS

Complex



Map A:



Empire of Mali

The year is 1307 and you are Mansa (king) Musa, ruler of the Mali Empire in West Africa (see Map A). You became king last year when the previous king of Mali, Abubakari Keita II, sailed west over the ocean with a fleet of two thousand ships.

He gave you authority and power to rule until he returned, but, to this day, no one has ever seen him again. So you are the king. Under previous kings, Mali has conquered other areas and become increasingly rich and powerful. Herding animals, farming, trading, and obtaining gold have all strengthened the economy. In the drier areas of the country, people herd cattle, sheep, and goats to graze in pastures.

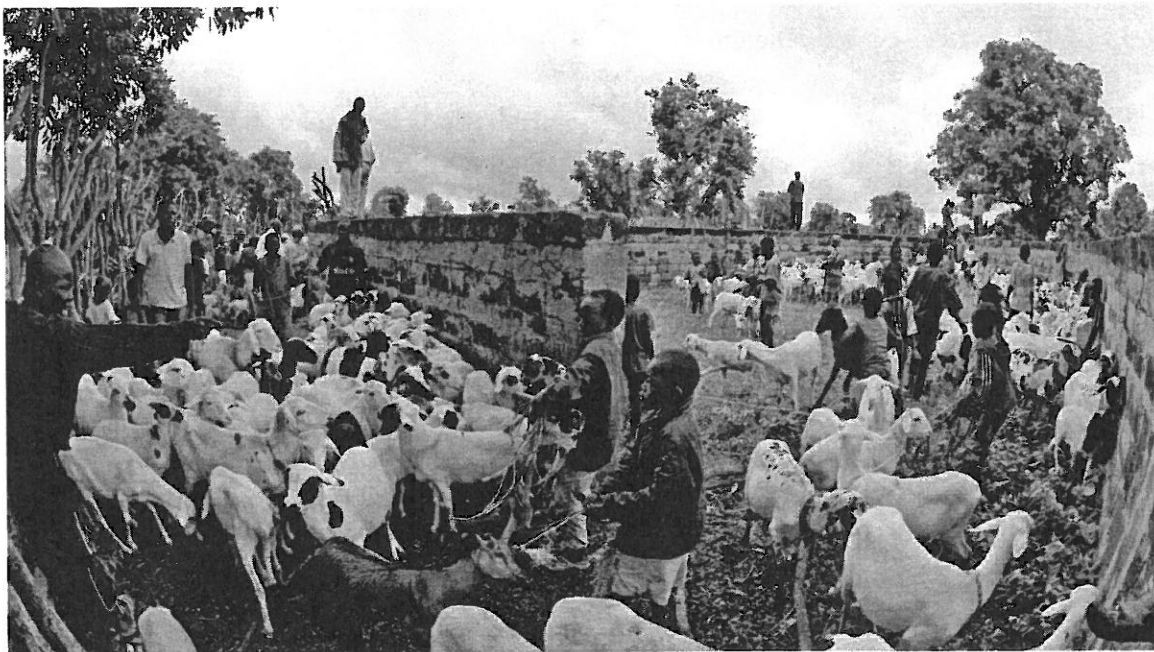
Farther south, where there is more rainfall, farmers grow cereal grains, and, in the rich soil along the Niger River, they grow rice. Mali grows trees, producing fruits that resemble apples, peaches, and apricots. In the tall grasslands and jungles, there are also plenty of animals for eating, such as African buffalo and gazelles. Trade is the lifeblood of Mali. The great cities of Mali, such as Walata and Timbuktu, are trading centers at the intersections of trade routes.



A caravan with goods to trade at the city of Timbuktu in Mali

Much of the trade comes from camel caravans going back and forth across the Sahara Desert. The journey is grueling and dangerous, but its profits are so great that merchants continue to hire people to make the trips. Some of the trade consists of slaves, but gold is the most important commodity. Malians (the people of Mali) mine gold from the gold fields shown on Map A. The people mine the gold in shallow pits. Although the mines are part of the empire, they are run by the miners because they have specialized knowledge of how to run the mines. Malian merchants trade the gold for salt and other products. Unfortunately, robbers regularly attack traders and take their goods.

The fear of being robbed reduces the amount of trade. The Mali government collects some taxes, but they are low, and government officials fail to collect all the taxes owed; as a result, some



People in Mali still herd goats and sheep today.

people do not pay any taxes. The government also lacks written laws that apply equally to all people in Mali. Moreover, because of the low level of taxes collected, there are few police and other officials that keep the empire's people safe. The army has enough strength to conquer some new areas outside Mali, but it is too disorganized to protect Mali's people. Overall, the government is solid and stable, but it is not as strong as it could be for such a rich society.

Which of the following will you implement to improve the economy and government of Mali? You can select as many as you would like or create an option of your own. Explain your choice(s).

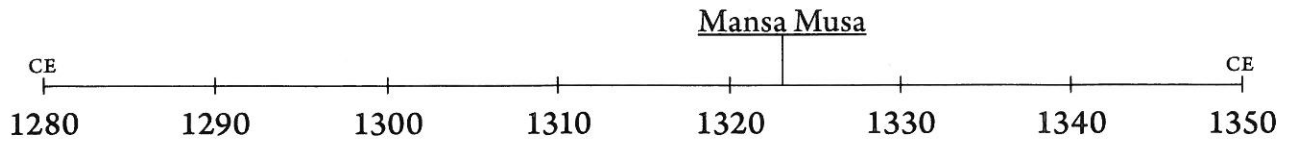
- A. Charge Malian traders, farmers, and herders high taxes and improve tax collection to make sure everyone pays what is owed.
- B. Charge non-Malians within the Mali Empire, including gold miners, high taxes, and improve tax collection to make sure everyone pays what is owed.
- C. Take over the gold mines and have Malians run them.
- D. Write a set of laws for the empire and make sure they are enforced fairly.
- E. Expand the size of the army to make it the largest and most powerful in this part of Africa. The army could be used to guard trade routes, make sure laws are obeyed, and capture even more land from neighboring states and tribes.



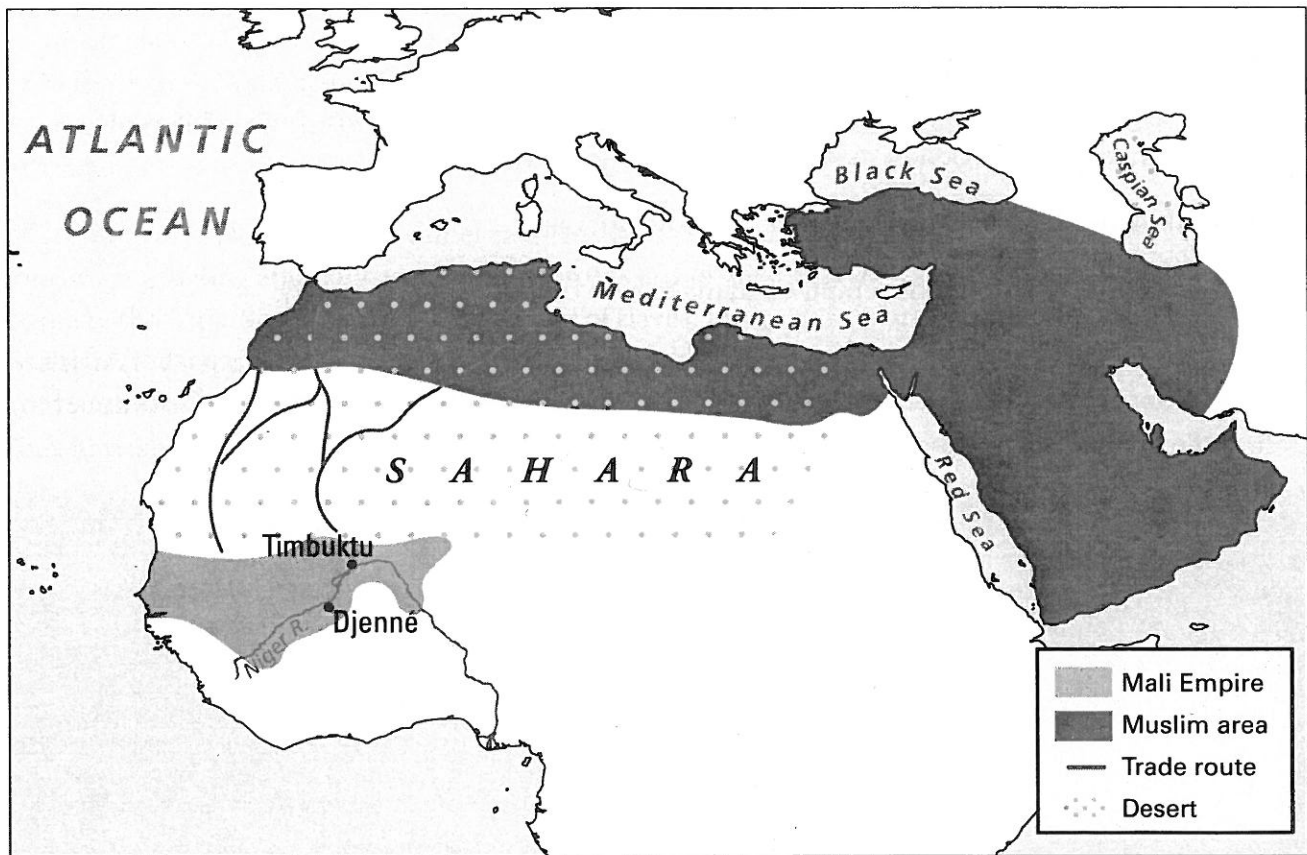
Buffalo in the Niger River

RELIGIOUS DECISIONS

Complex



Map B:

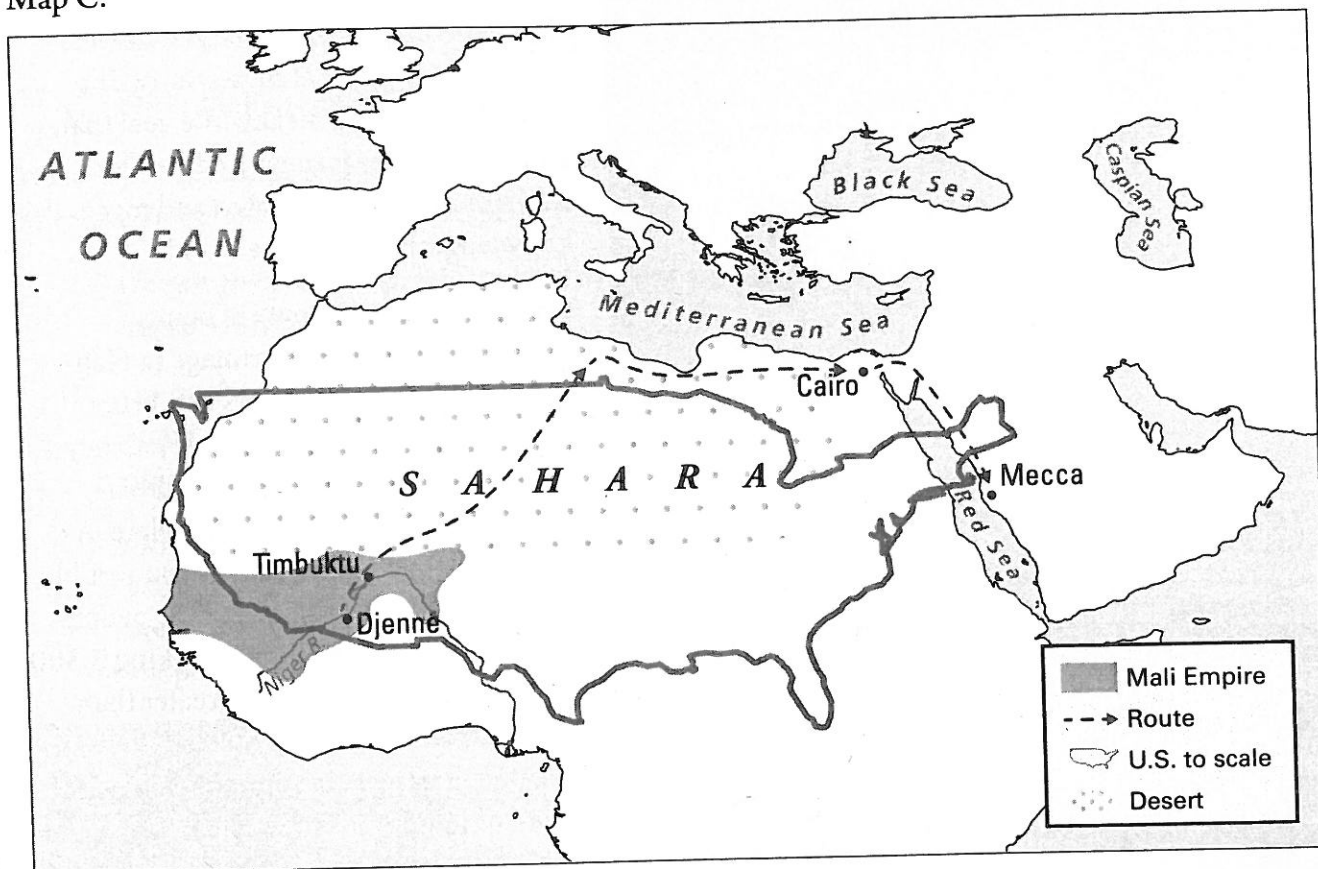


Mali, Muslim areas, and trade routes

You are Mansa Musa and it is now 1324, so you have been ruling as king for seventeen years. You are also a Muslim, and your faith guides your decisions as king. You devote time during your day to prayer and reading the Koran, the holy book of Islam. Some people in the Mali Empire are Muslims as well. As a Muslim, you believe in one god, Allah, to whom you submit. Muhammad, who was the great prophet (a teacher who makes known the will of God) of Islam, was a trader.

It is natural, then, that Islam spread to Mali through traders (see Map B). Islam is communicated through Arabic, which is a written language and increases literacy (the ability to read and write); it therefore unites all Muslims with a single language and increases trade. When traders in Mali convert to Islam, they become connected with traders and leaders in other countries or groups, which increases their sales and profits.

Map C:



Distance to Mecca compared to the size of the United States

In contrast, most people in Mali practice traditional religions, including magic, ancestor worship, and animism. For example, farmers believe that agricultural gods, the “spirits of the land,” ensure success of crops. Farmers and herders pray to their ancestors for guidance on decisions and to avoid disasters.

Ancestor worship also makes people feel part of the larger community. The village chief (local mansa) is often the person most directly descended from the earliest farmers. As the guardian of the ancestors, the village chief is the traditional religious and political leader. While many merchants and political leaders are converting to Islam, farmers and herders continue to practice traditional religion. These differences are beginning to create a separation between religious groups. The farmers



The skulls of ancestors, which believers can visit to show respect



An altar where animist believers pray

and herders, who do not understand all the elements of Islam, see the followers of Islam as somewhat mysterious. The followers of Islam, meanwhile, feel that, compared to the farmers and herders, they are more sophisticated and more knowledgeable about the world.

One of the requirements of being a Muslim is making a pilgrimage (a Hajj) to Mecca once in a person's life. From Mali, it is a long and dangerous journey on foot (see Map C) across the desert, taking more than a year to complete. As king, you would be carried or you would be riding a horse, but most of the people you take with you would be walking 3,500 miles each way (a distance greater than a walk across the United States). Wells (located in oases) are sometimes an eight-, nine-, or ten-day journey apart.

There would have to be a lot of water packed for each person to survive up to ten days in a desert. (Travelers have sometimes had to kill camels and drink the liquid from their humps.) In an

especially dry year, there might not be enough water for even a small caravan. Plus, it is easy to get lost in the desert. According to Ibn Battuta, a traveler in the Sahara Desert, "There is no road to be seen in the desert and no track, only sand blown about by the wind" (De Villiers 2007). Previous kings from this part of Africa have made the Hajj, but one of them (Sakura) died on the journey.

On the other hand, a Hajj will connect Mali much more closely with trade in the Islamic world, opening up new opportunities for merchants in the empire. In addition, Mali and its wealth will be known more fully to the outside world. This information may lead travelers to Mali, bringing with them new ideas.

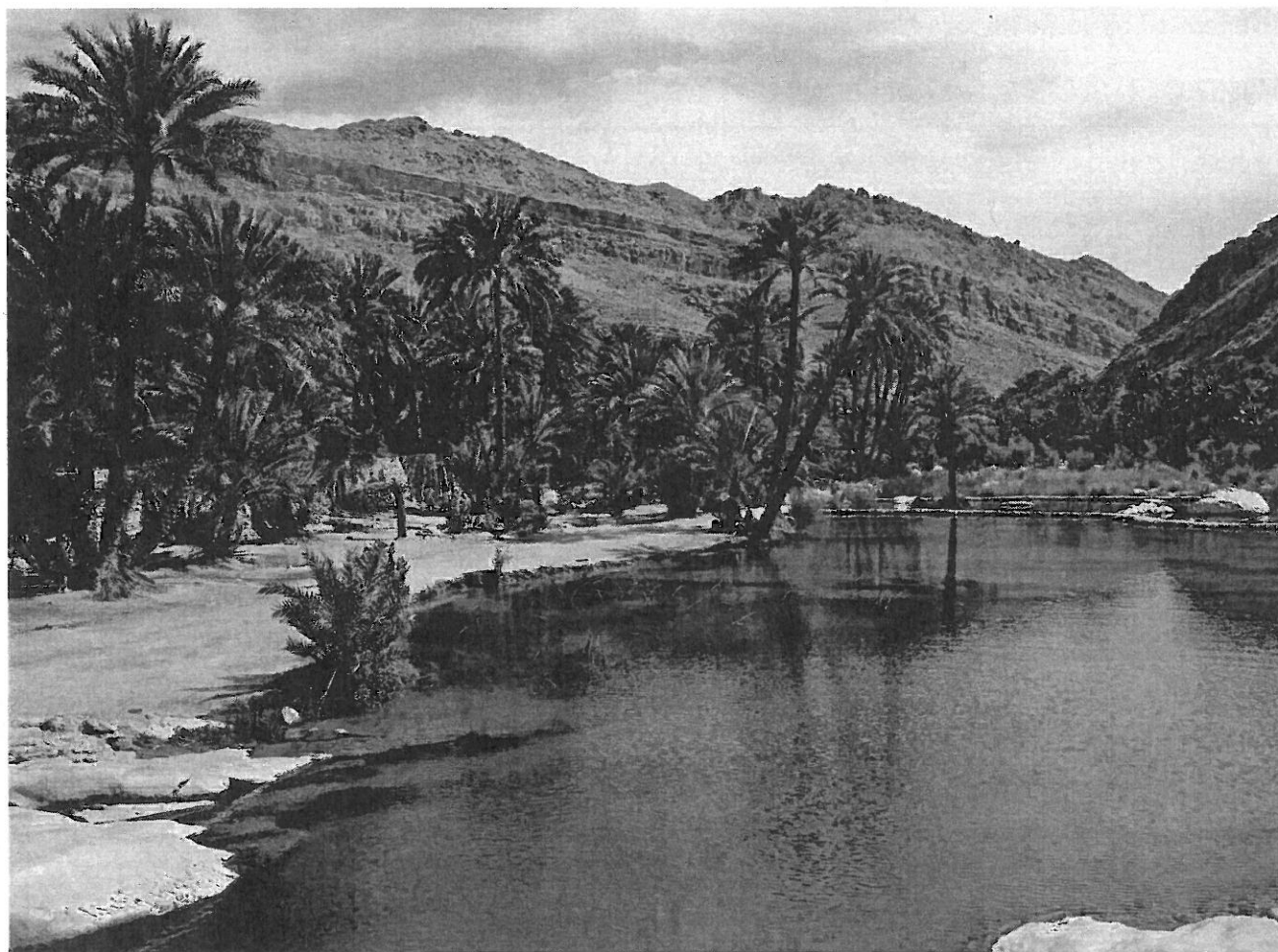
Which of the following options will you choose regarding religion in Mali? You can select as many as you would like or create an option of your own. Explain your choice(s).

- A. Use force to make people in the Mali convert to Islam. It has been done before in other places. When Abu Bakr conquered Ghana, he suppressed traditional religions.

- B. Allow people of the Mali Empire to choose their religion, but make non-Muslims pay higher taxes. This would ensure that more people will convert to Islam.
- C. Allow Malians to choose their religion, without any restrictions.

What will you decide about the pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj)? You can select one of the options or create an option of your own. Explain your choice(s).

- D. Do not go on the Hajj. It is too costly, too far, and too dangerous. Use the money instead to improve life for the people of Mali.
- E. Go on the Hajj, taking a small number of people and enough gold to get to Mecca and back home. With this plan you will not be spending too much money, which could otherwise be used to improve the lives of the people in Mali.
- F. Go on the Hajj, taking a large number of people and a huge amount of gold. With this plan, you can show off Mali's wealth and attract the interest of people all over the world to your country. Also, you could give some of the money to the poor, as good Muslims are supposed to do.



Oases, such as this one, are often far apart.

EXCERPTS FROM A REPORT ON MANSA MUSA IN CAIRO

Primary Source

This is an excerpt written by historian Al-Umari.

During my first journey to Cairo and sojourn there [a few years after Mansa Musa was in Cairo] I heard talk of the arrival of the Sultan Musa and I found the Cairenes [people of Cairo] very glad to talk of the large expenditures of those people. I questioned the Emir Abu'l 'Abbas Ahmed ben Abi'l Haki, el Mehmendar [the Egyptian sultan's welcoming official], who spoke of the sultan's [Mansa Musa's] noble appearance, dignity, and trustworthiness.

[The welcoming official stated:] "When I went out to greet him [Mansa Musa] in the name of the glorious Sultan el Malik en Nasir [of Egypt] . . . he gave me the warmest of welcomes and treated me with the most careful politeness. But he would talk to me only through an interpreter although he could speak perfect Arabic. He carried his imperial treasure in many pieces of gold, worked or otherwise.

I suggested that he should go up to the palace and meet the Sultan [of Egypt]. But he refused, saying: 'I came for the pilgrimage, and for nothing else, and I do not wish to mix up my pilgrimage with anything else.' He argued about this. However, I well understood that the meeting was repugnant to him because he was loath to kiss the ground before the Sultan or to kiss his hand. I went on insisting, and he went on making excuses. But imperial protocol obliged me to present him, and I did not leave him until he had agreed. When he came into the Sultan's presence we asked him to kiss the ground. But he refused and continued to refuse, saying: 'However can this be?' Then a wise man of his suite whispered several words to him that I could not understand. 'Very well,' he thereupon declared, 'I will prostrate myself before Allah who created me and brought me into the world.' Having done so he moved toward the Sultan. The latter rose for a moment to welcome him and asked him to sit beside him; then they had a long conversation. After Sultan Musa had left the palace the Sultan of Cairo sent him gifts of clothing for himself, his courtiers, and all those who were with him; saddled and bridled horses for himself and his chief officers. . . . When the time of pilgrimage [to continue to Mecca] arrived, [the Sultan of Egypt] sent him a large quantity of drachmas, luggage camels, and choice riding camels with saddles and harness. [The Sultan of Egypt] caused abundant quantities of foodstuffs to be bought for his suite and his followers, established posting-stations for the feeding of the animals, and gave to the emirs of the pilgrimage a written order to look after and respect [the Emperor of Mali]. When the latter returned it was I who went to greet him and settle him into his quarters. . . .

This man [Mansa Musa] . . . spread upon Cairo the flood of his generosity: There was no person, officer of the [Cairo] court or holder of any office of the [Cairo] sultanate who did not receive a sum in gold from him. The people of Cairo earned incalculable sums from him, whether by buying and selling or by gifts. So much gold was current in Cairo that it ruined the value of money.”

Source: Al-Umari. “Kingdom of Mali: Primary Source Documents.” In *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, edited by J. F. P. Hopkins and Nehemia Levtzion. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. According to this source, why did the people of Cairo like Mansa Musa so much?
2. List three character traits of Mansa Musa revealed in this document.
3. How reliable is this document as a source?