An Interdisciplinary approach to the Civilization of Ancient Ghana

Ancient Ghana, Land Of Gold

UCLA International Institute

Summer of 1999
Extension

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Unit of Lessons for: Ancient Ghana and the Niger River.

Lesson Length: Nine to ten days, depending on the student ability level, teaching style, and the amount of involvement of the English teacher.

State Framework: This unit includes Africa's oldest interior empires. Students should be introduced to the culture that developed there, including the development of iron agricultural tools and weapons; an alphabet; and a profitable trade that extended to Arabia, India, sub-Saharan Africa, and possibly China.

State Standards: 6.2 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Africa/Kush, in terms of:
1- the location and description of the river systems, and physical settings that supported permanent settlement and early civilizations.
2- the development of agricultural techniques that permitted the production of economic surplus and the emergence of cities as centers of culture and power.
3- the relationship between religion and the social and political order

LAUSD Standards: 19- Analyze and Explain how geography effected the social, political, and economic development of the ancient civilizations.

Geography Standards: 1- How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.
4- The physical and human characteristics of places.
7- The physical processes that shape the patterns of Earth's surface.
9- The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations on Earth's surface.
12- The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement.
14- How human actions modify the physical environment.
17- How to apply geography to interpret the past.

Focus: What are the physical characteristics of the Niger River and the land around it? How did environment influence the civilization of Ghana?
How did the social, economic and religious needs of the people determine the events of this region? How was this important in the development of our modern civilizations?

**Objectives:**

To accurately locate and mark the physical feature of the Niger River by using descriptive readings.
To analyze the physical features and the cultural characteristics of the Niger River region to see how they effected the people.
To evaluate primary source artifacts and literature from the area to suggest the motivations of the people.
To compare and contrast the settlement patterns and lifestyles of the people living in the region today.

**Primary Sources:**

Excerpts found in *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, by Nehemia Levtzion.
Excerpts found in *The Chronicle of the Seeker- Mahmud Kati*.
Corpus of *Early Arabic Sources for West Africa*, by J.F.P Hopkins.

**Science involvement:** Use slides of the Niger and the African societies of today in the National Geographic, and print materials to have the students write a journal with drawings and explanations of the technological and scientific developments of the Israelites and the Jordan Valley region.
Chemicals, their sources and uses: Musical Instruments
Stone and Metal working for weapons and tools: Agriculture, domestication/scientific process
Transportation, developments: Mineral, uses and sources
Medicines, available plants and animals: Water technology
Evidence has been found that West Africa was once connected with South America as the supercontinent of Pangaea. Lessons on that evidence, plate tectonics and continental drift have been included.

**Math Involvement:** Graphing and mapping statistics about the Niger, analyze the meaning of the results. The measurement of velocity of the water movement in the river.
Population statistics, Estimation of how much food can be grown in the geographic area and what kind of a population it could support in ancient times.
Student can make a balancing scale and weights just like the Asante used to weigh gold.

**Art:**
Isn’t S/He a Doll? Lessons about African dolls; how they are made and what they are for.

**Activities:**

1. **Mapping the Geography of Africa.** Students will identify major geographical dynamics within and surrounding Africa.
2. Mapping the Trade Routes Leading to Ancient Ghana. Students will draw the ancient trek of the traders, plus label the salt and gold mines.

3. Timeline. Create a timeline depicting events around the world at the time of Ancient Ghana.

4. The Royal Palace of the Ancient Kingdom of Ghana. Read the primary sources about the royal palace and al-Bakr’s Description of Ghana and discern information about the kingdom and its economic level.

5. Wealth Through Trade. Students will read and/or discuss the description of a dumb barter and explore the nature of this system.

6. Ancient Ghana: The Center of Trade. Students will read the primary sources written by al-Bakr to understand the relationship between social organization, tax system, and trade process and how together they play a factor in achieving cooperation, wealth, and power within a kingdom.

7. Culminating Activity: Ancient Ghana Museum. Students will create and display an exhibit portraying their maps, timelines, charts, pictures, folktales, artwork, etc. Invite other classes to take a tour!

Assessment:

Students will be assessed on active participation in classroom discussions, identification of major geographic features, ability to read critically and make inferences, double entry journals, graphics, reflection on a day in the life of a soldier in the military or an Arab trader.

Materials:

- Transparencies
- Slides
- Copies of the handouts
- Slide projector
- Overhead projector
- Overhead making pens in a variety of colors.
- 3x5 cards, paper clips, and clothes line.
- Rulers and drawing material, crayons, colored pencils, and or marker.
Background

The ancient kingdom of Ghana was about 500 miles (805 kilometers) northwest of the present-day nation of Ghana. It flourished along the Niger River before the Sahara Desert reached its long, dry fingers that far south. Ghana was a highly sophisticated economic and military center from the fourth to the tenth centuries.

Ancient Ghana based their prosperity on trading in gold and salt. Although the Sahara Desert separates West from North Africa, it never formed an uncrossable barrier. For more than 2,000 years, people have made the 1,500 mile (2,400-km) journey mostly to trade, but both ideas and goods have been exchanged. West Africa’s reserves of gold became the major source of supply of the Arab world and, from there, to Europe and Asia.

Ghana was not an easy land to cross. As far back as 400 B.C. the trek across the Sahara Desert was made with mules or horses. The introduction of the camel, in 100 A.D. from Asia, could possibly be one of the most important contributions to the success of trade in the Sudan. The stamina of the camel was far greater, for it was able to go long distances without water and its wide hooves provided stability for the heavy loads that it carried.

Bordered on the north by the Sahara Desert, on the east by the highlands of Cameroon, and on the west and south by the Atlantic Ocean, West Africa forms a natural geographical region. It can be categorized into four regions: the Sahara, the Sahel (a semidesert strip south of the Sahara), savanna, (grasslands with scattered trees and shrubs), and forests. Other features include the major rivers (Niger, Benue, Senegal, Volta, and Gambia) and the mountains and highlands.

Ghana has always been at the center of human activity in West Africa. Archaeologists have found ancient stone choppers and other tools buried deep under Ghana’s modern landscape. They date back thousands and thousands of years. Many of these implements have been discovered along the banks of the White Volta River, in north central Ghana. Stone tools dating from later periods have been found elsewhere in the country, usually along waterways. People wandered back and forth across the West African landscape, leaving evidence of their passing scattered from riverbank to forest edge. Sometimes they planted
crops but they mainly hunted and gathered. Trade was a major feature of their lives and they lived by bartering. Some stone tool “factories” have been discovered and it was at these sites that goods were exchanged for items made or grown by their neighbors. This was the pattern of life throughout West Africa for many centuries to follow.

The region known as Ancient Ghana was comprised of many peoples. The Soninke was one such people. Their story was kept alive through what scholars call “oral tradition”. The Soninke became the ruling elite of what was called Wagadu. The Soninke believed that they could influence their destiny through proper thought and action. They were capable farmers but “the single most important influence on the future of the Soninke was the presence of gold in West Africa". Another major factor to contribute to the economic success of Ancient Ghana is their superior technology. They had achieved a highly sophisticated understanding of iron-smithing enabling them to fashion spears made of iron. This achievement in itself gave them the power to control an empire for hundreds of years making them one of the strongest empires in the world. For example Kumbi Saleh became one of the richest cities of the Soninke because of its location near the goldfields of Bambuk. They were able to defend their mines because of their strong military. This strength was the key to safe passage through the Kingdom of Ghana. Since all trade passed through Ghana, they were able to demand the conditions set forth for safe passage. They placed a tax on incoming traders of one dinar and a tax of two dinar for exit. We refer to this as import/export tax. Another example of their economic prowess was their ability to control the stability of their monetary system. The King regulated the gold by restricting payment of goods to gold dust only. The King declared that gold nuggets were property of the empire. This decree instilled stability of the gold thus creating a monopoly. Another factor that contributed to the success of the Ancient Ghanaians was their understanding of foreign trade. They realized the needs of their Muslim neighbors to the north, and traded gold for salt. Thus the foreign trade market began.

Although Ancient Ghana, as well as, West Africa have not been given the notoriety in history they deserve we, as students must continue to search for the truth. The social, economic and technological contributions by the West Africans are by far greater than most historians have recorded. Fortunately the indigenous peoples continue to recant their tales through “oral traditions” and now have a written record to pass down the legacy to their children.
Mapping

Lesson 1

Students will use an atlas to locate and label geographical locations listed. Color codes can be used.

Africa
West Africa
Senegal River
Lake Chad
Savanna Grasslands
Equator
Gulf of Guinea

Niger River
Sahara Desert
Atlantic Ocean
Nile River
Rain Forest
Ancient Ghana
Gambia River

Lesson 2

Using transparency students will superimpose the trade routes of salt and gold traders. Students will also label the salt mines, gold mines and major cities.

Extensions

Students will create a 3 dimensional map. Students will work in small co-op group to complete this project. They will decide on a medium to create 3-D effect (Possible choices: dried split peas, corn and beans or mosaic with magazine pieces).
## EVENTS TO 1903

### WEST AFRICAN EVENTS
Countries or locations in parentheses give the modern-day locations of the states. Dates of independence appear in a table after the chronology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to 1900 CE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 BCE</td>
<td>Nok Culture in existence (Nigeria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1 CE</td>
<td>Start of dispersal of Bantu peoples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>Nok Culture ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>Empire of Ghana emerges (Mali)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 700s</td>
<td>Igbo Ukwu Culture in existence (Nigeria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 750</td>
<td>Kingdom of Kangaba, from which the Empire of Mali emerges, is founded (Mali). Songhay state emerges (Mali)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 800</td>
<td>Kingdom of Kanem emerges (Lake Chad region)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800s</td>
<td>Takrur founded (Senegal)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### WORLD EVENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to 1900 CE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>510 BCE</td>
<td>Republic of Rome established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 CE</td>
<td>Jesus of Nazareth crucified</td>
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<tr>
<td>455</td>
<td>Vandals sack Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>622</td>
<td>Muhammad’s flight to Medina: founding of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>624</td>
<td>T’ang dynasty unites China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>793</td>
<td>Viking raids begin in Europe</td>
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<tr>
<td>1001–1500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1050</td>
<td>Islam introduced to West Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1150</td>
<td>Empire of Ghana at its height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200s</td>
<td>Kingdom of Benin emerges (Nigeria). Mossi states begin to be established (Ghana)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1230</td>
<td>Kanem at its height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1235</td>
<td>Empire of Mali founded (Mali)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1240</td>
<td>Mali absorbs Ghana and Songhay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1250</td>
<td>Takrur absorbed by Mali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300</td>
<td>Yoruba state of Oyo is established (Nigeria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1325</td>
<td>Empire of Mali at its height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1340s</td>
<td>Songhay independent from Mali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1350</td>
<td>Hausa city-states emerge (Nigeria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1386</td>
<td>State of Borno established (Lake Chad region)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400s</td>
<td>Wolof Empire founded (Senegal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1443</td>
<td>Portuguese establish first fort on coast (Mauritania)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1490</td>
<td>Mali eclipsed by Songhay Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1501–1700</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1510</td>
<td>Start of Atlantic slave trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1515</td>
<td>Songhay at its height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1526</td>
<td>Borno controls Kanem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1550</td>
<td>Wolof Empire dissolved. Mali ceases to exist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1587</td>
<td>Portuguese take control of Cape Verde Islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1590</td>
<td>Songhay defeated by Moroccans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1591</td>
<td>Kanem-Borno at greatest extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1625</td>
<td>Dahomey (Benin) established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1631</td>
<td>England establishes first post on Gold Coast (coastal Ghana)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1519–22</td>
<td>Magellan’s circumnavigation of the world. Hernan Cortés conquers the Aztecs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1526</td>
<td>Mughal Empire founded in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1550</td>
<td>Potato introduced to Europe from America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1619</td>
<td>First African slaves arrive in</td>
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THE ROYAL PALACE OF THE ANCIENT KINGDOM OF GHANA

A. Objectives

1. To identify when and where the kingdom of Ghana existed.

2. To examine the DRAMATIC MOMENT.

3. To speculate on life in ancient Ghana—economics, government.

4. To understand the historical connection between Africa's past and present.

B. Lesson Activities (Two Class Periods)

1. Have students identify the western half of Africa; then identify the area known as the western Sudan. Have students identify from their previous map work the type of land to the north and south of the Sudan.

2. Show students the area believed to be that of ancient Ghana (See MAP II, in LESSON ONE). Students should identify that area on their self-made maps—label or draw an icon on the area.

3. Have students read the DRAMATIC MOMENT.

4. Discuss the description. Sample questions:

   a. What do we know of the kingdom from this description?

   b. What might be the economic level of the people?
The Royal Riches of Ancient Ghana

It was “adorned with sculptures, paintings and glass windows. None of the 1000 horses slept except upon a carpet, nor was he tied except by a silken rope round his neck and to his foot ... each horse had three persons attached to his service and seated near him. One took charge of his food, the second of his drink, and the third took charge of his urine and droppings, the king enthroned on a seat of red gold surrounded by numerous flaming torches, watching 10,000 of his subjects being served from the royal palace.”

The Chronicle of the Seeker – Mahmud Kati
Al Bakri's Description of Ghana

The king's residence comprises a palace and conical huts, the whole surrounded by a fence like a wall. Around the royal town are huts and groves of thorn trees where live the magicians who control their religious rites. These groves, where they keep their idols and bury their kings, are protected by guards who permit no one to enter or find out what goes on in them.

None of those who belong to the imperial religion may wear tailored garments except the king himself and the heir-presumptive, his sister's son. The rest of the people wear wrappers of cotton, silk or brocade according to their means. Most of the men shave their beards and the women their heads. The king adorns himself with female ornaments around the neck and arms. On his head he wears gold-embroidered caps covered with turbans of finest cotton. He gives audience to the people for the redressing of grievances in a hut around which are placed 10 horses covered in golden cloth. Behind him stand 10 slaves carrying shields and swords mounted with gold. On his right are the sons of vassal kings, their heads plaited with gold and wearing costly garments. On the ground around him are seated his ministers, whilst the governor of the city sits before him. On guard at the door are dogs of fine pedigree, wearing collars adorned with gold and silver. The royal audience is announced by the beating of a drum, called daba, made out of a long piece of hollowed-out wood. When the people have gathered, his co-religionists draw near upon their knees sprinkling dust upon their heads as a sign of respect, whilst the Muslims clap hands as their form of greeting.
WEALTH THROUGH TRADE

A. Objectives

1. To understand the need for and process of trade within Ancient Africa.

2. To explore the nature of the "dumb barter" system.

3. To speculate upon methods developed by the Kingdom of Ghana to capitalize on the trade process.

B. Lesson Activities (One Period)

1. Using the sample questions below, initiate a discussion about trade. Have children look at map of Africa and surrounding continents. Explain that salt was a product of the Sahara Desert; and that gold was moved in the area south of the Kingdom of Ghana.

   a. Have you ever made a trade with a friend?

   b. Why did you want to trade?

   c. Did you ever think the trade was unfair?

   d. How did you decide how much your possession was worth?

   e. Looking at the map of Africa, why might people need to trade goods?

   f. What natural conditions might make trade difficult in Africa?

   g. From where might the traders come?

2. Explain to the students that the description of "dumb barter" is based upon description left to us by Arab
and European travelers and might contain inaccuracies, but has been passed down as the method of exchange between African and Arab tradesmen.

3. Distribute DOCUMENT B. Divide the class into small groups to read the sequence of events in a dumb barter. Encourage them to role play the sequence.

a. Questions to facilitate discussion:

- Why was this called dumb barter?

- What are some reasons (pros and cons) for trade without words?

- Some historians believe that dumb barter was a story made up by foreign travelers. Why might foreign travelers fabricate this story?

4. Inform the students that Ghana’s wealth grew out of this trade. Tell them that neither gold nor salt were produced within the kingdom of Ghana. Ask them to speculate upon how the empire managed to benefit from the trading.

C. Evaluation Activities

Before beginning LESSON FOUR, have students write or draw in their Ancient Ghana double-entry journals (or scrapbook), information recounting the system of dumb barter. A painted scene depicting dumb barter could be added to an ongoing mural. (Some teachers might prefer to wait until the end of the unit to begin a mural when the students have more information for planning the location of particular scenes.)
DUMB BARTER

From the north Arab traders arrived in the Kingdom of Ghana and arranged their goods, salt, silk, copper, and metal pots, in marked piles along the banks of the Senegal River. They announced the opening of the market with the beating of drums and then retreated into town to await the arrival of merchants from the south. Traders from Wangara (a region south of Ghana), hearing the drums, sailed up the river with gold. The Wangara traders examined the goods and placed what they felt was an equivalent value of gold by each pile of goods and then retreated to their sailing barks on the river. Arab traders returned to the market. If they were satisfied with the amount of gold left, they sounded the drums again signalling the end of the barter. If they were unsatisfied, they retreated into town and waited for the Wangara traders to return and increase their payment. This process was repeated until both sides were satisfied with the exchange.
ANCIENT GHANA: THE CENTER OF TRADE

A. Objectives

1. To understand the relationship between the Kingdom of Ghana and the traders of North Africa.

2. To learn about the social organization established within the kingdom.

3. To know of the tax system employed by the Kingdom upon the trade process within the empire.

4. To appreciate a civilization’s use of the above factors for achieving cooperation, wealth, and power.

B. Lesson Activities (Two Periods)

1. Remind the students that Ancient Ghana did not own the gold or salt fields and did not control the mining of gold or salt—these resources came from areas to the North and South of the kingdom. Present to the students the question, “How did Ghana develop the wealth exhibited in the palace court description by Al-Bakri?” Have students brainstorm possibilities.

2. If not suggested by the students, tell them that the wealth came from the kingdom’s ability to control the trade of goods. Have students suggest ways that a king could achieve this control of trade.

3. As students suggest “a strong military” or “conquest” etc., fill them in on the detail that yes, Ghana did develop a strong military. Share with them that Ghana used its technological expertise to develop iron spears and this clearly gave it an advantage in the field. But suggest that this advantage was used
ANCIENT GHANA: THE CENTER OF TRADE

for other than conquest and military threat. Ask students to suggest functions for a military other than threat and warfare, i.e., How might a strong military aid in the passage of trade? How might it be used as a factor in cooperation?

4. Have students read the original sources from Al-Bakri and discuss the implications of each. From the readings, have the students describe Ancient Ghana's social organization, foreign policy, and tax system.

5. Have students role play interactions between palace court members and North African traders, using the information gained in the readings.

6. Have students sketch a picture of the two towns and/or the act of traders paying taxes to the representatives of the palace court.

7. Explain that the kingdom of Ghana retained its indigenous lifestyle (architecture, religion, burial ceremonies, myths), rather than take on the lifestyle of the North African Arabs. Encourage students to do further reading on the lifestyles of ancient African kingdoms and report back to the class.
Al-Bakri: On the City of Ghana

The City of Ghana consists of two towns in a plain. One of these towns is inhabited by Muslims. It is large with a dozen mosques in one of which they assemble for the Friday prayer. Around the town are wells of sweet water from which they drink and near which they cultivate vegetables. The royal town, called al-Ghaba ['the grove'], is six miles away from the Muslim town, and the area between the two towns is covered with houses. Their houses are made of stone and acacia wood. The king has a palace and conical huts, surrounded by a wall-like enclosure. In the king's town, not far from the royal court of justice, is a mosque where pray the Muslims who come there on missions.

Al-Bakri: On the Court of Justice in Ancient Ghana

Ghana is the title of the kings of this people... the king who governs them at present is called Tunka Minen; he came to the throne in AH455 [1067AD]
Tunka Minen is the master of a large empire and a formidable power. The King of Ghana can put two hundred thousand warriors in the field. When he gives audience to his people, to listen to their complaints and set them to rights, he sits in a pavilion around which stand ten pages holding shields and gold mounted swords; and on his right hand are the sons of the princes of his empire, splendidly clad and with gold plated into their hair. The Governor of the city is seated on the ground in front of the king, and all around him are his counselors in the same position. The gate of the chamber is guarded by dogs of an excellent breed, who never leave their place of duty; they wear collars of gold and silver, ornamented with the same metals. The beginning of a royal audience is announced by the beating of a kind of drum which they call deba, made of a long piece of hollowed wood. The people gather when they hear this sound.

Al-Bakri: On How the King Raises Money Through Trade

On every donkey's load of salt the king of Ghana levied one golden dinar when it entered his country and two dinars when it left. On a load of copper five mithqals and on a load of other merchandise ten mithqals... The king received profits from the gold production by ruling that rare nuggets weighing between an ounce and a rotli, i.e., 1lb, found in the mines of his country were reserved for the king, and only gold dust was left for the...
Bibliography


