



POWELL CENTER FOR
ECONOMIC LITERACY

Lesson Plan

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Pre-Colonial West African Kingdoms

Time Required

15 – 30 minutes

Grade Level and Subject

Middle and High School; World History

Keystone Principles

Principle #6 – Do What You Do Best, Trade for the Rest

Principle #8 – Quantity and Quality of Available Resources Influence Living Standards

Principle #9 – Prices Are Determined by the Market Forces of Supply and Demand

Economic Concepts

Barter – *The exchange of one good for another, without the use of money.*

Monopoly - *A market structure in which there is a single supplier of a good or service. Also, a firm that is the single supplier of a good or service for which there are no close substitutes; also known as a monopolist.*

Needs – *An economic good or service that is generally considered required to sustain life.*

Resources - *Factors of production such as land, labor, capital, technology, and entrepreneurial skills that are used to produce goods and services, to satisfy the wants and needs of consumers.*

Wants – *All those things, tangible and intangible, people might wish to possess, but which are not absolutely necessary for their survival.*

Overview

Between the 5th and 16th centuries a number of powerful kingdoms and empires flourished in West Africa, and much of their power was predicated on the development of trade with North Africa and with the Arab lands to the east. The West African kingdoms had developed stone and clay-working skills, and were also the location of major gold

mines. The North African region had an abundance of salt, an essential ingredient in a hot, arid region. With the rise of trade, the West African kingdoms were able to develop more sophisticated societies. Their economic history is particularly interesting, with many lessons still applicable today.

Objectives

- Students will use the material available to prove the kingdom qualifies as a civilization. (This draws on previously learned criteria: complex government, organized religion, cities, arts and architecture, public works, social classes, job specialization and writing.)
- Students will analyze the economic system in use and write a proverb that can be learned from the kingdom and applied today.
- Students will locate and sketch the location of the kingdom on a map of Africa.

Materials and Handouts

- Textbook or information fact sheets on West African kingdoms.
- The following BBC site can be used to locate information.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/index_section4.shtml.
- The following link specifically discusses the value of the gold/salt trade:
<http://library.advanced.org/13406/sh/>

Teaching Activity

1. Review the criteria for determining a civilization.
2. Separate the students into groups. The BBC web link provides information on seven kingdoms: Ancient Ghana; Kanem; Mali; Songhay; Hausa States; Asante; Ife and Benin.
3. Hand out the reading. Have students individually determine the following:
 - a. Is the kingdom a civilization? Name at least three specific criteria used to make this determination.
 - b. What did you find unique or particularly interesting about the civilization?
 - c. What economic principle was used? How can we still apply it today? In almost all cases, students will find examples of all three of the listed Keystone Principles.
4. Have students identify the resources available for use, who is able to use them and who reaps the rewards from their use.
 - a. Which natural resources were abundant in the region? (*Stone, clay, gold*)
 - b. What natural resources were missing in the region? (*Salt*) Where could they obtain what they needed? (*North Africa*)
 - c. How did trade improve living standards in the kingdom?
5. Once most students have completed the above, have them share their answers with their group. Instruct each group to put together a poster containing the following:
 - a. The three criteria to prove it is a civilization
 - b. A map of West Africa with the kingdom indicated
 - c. Write an economic proverb that can be learned and applied
6. Have each team present their posters.
7. As a follow-up, open the following two points for discussion

- a. Notice the role of the Sahara Desert. The aridity of the region poses a significant problem, but it also provided a protective barrier from invading armies. It can be argued that without it, the mutual benefits of trade might have been overshadowed by the desire to control the gold mines.
- b. At times, gold and salt were traded for equal value by weight. Would this be true in our society? Why would it have been true then? (*Salt was used for flavoring and preserving food, essential for sustaining the growing population of the West African region. It also helps to keep moisture in the human body, which would be especially important in arid lands.*) Equilibrium price is established by the intersection of supply and demand. Have students provide an economic explanation of the gold/salt trade.