Ten Important Facts About the Kingdoms of West Africa
1. In early Africa, the arts were a means of serving religion.

- For example, **wood-carvers** throughout Africa made **remarkable masks and statues**. The carvings often represented gods, spirits or ancestral figures.

- In the 13th and 14th centuries, metalworkers produced bronze and iron statues at Ife in what is today Nigeria and artists in Benin in West Africa produced **impressive bronze works**.
West African Wooden Masks
Benin Bronze Works
West African Society and Culture

• African dance was a way to communicate with the spirits. It was the great popular art of the African people. With its strong rhythmic beat, African music would come to influence modern popular western music.
West African Dance
Society and Culture

2. Most African societies shared some common religious ideas, including belief in a single creator god and lesser gods. These gods could not always be trusted, so humans needed to appease them to avoid their anger.

Ritual was a way to communicate with the gods. It was usually carried out by a special class of diviners, people who were believed to have the power to foretell events, usually by working with supernatural forces.
3. Europeans did not introduce slavery to Africa. In fact, it had been practiced there since ancient times. North African Berber groups regularly raided villages south of the Sahara for captives. The captives were taken north and sold throughout the Mediterranean region. The sale and use of captives for forced labor was common in African societies, further south and along the east coast.
Arab Slave Trade in West Africa
Society and Culture

4. Traditional African religious beliefs were challenged and frequently replaced by Islam. The process likely began as a result of trade, as merchants introduce Muslim beliefs to the trading states of Mali, Ghana and Songhai. By the end of the 1400s, much of the population south of the Sahara had accepted Islam.
Society and Culture

5. The absence of written language, the words to songs transmitted folk legends and religious traditions from generation to generation. Storytelling by a special class of storytellers known as griots served as oral historians and genealogists who kept alive a people’s history. The epic of Sundiata which tells the story of the first Mali king was passed down by griots.
Importance of the Griot
The Kingdom of Ghana

6. The Kings of Ghana were strong rulers who actively governed their kingdom and their wealth was vast. To protect their kingdom and enforce their will, Ghanian kings relied on a well-trained regular army of thousands of men.
Ghana had an abundance of gold. The heartland of the state was located near one of the richest gold-producing areas in all of Africa. Ghana’s gold made it the center of an enormous trade empire.

Muslim merchants from North Africa brought to Ghana metal goods, textiles, horses, and salt. Salt was highly desired. Ghanians traded their abundant gold for products brought from North Africa. Other Ghanian exports carried to the markets of the Mediterranean included ivory, hides and slaves.

Camel caravans carried much of the trade across the desert. (3 miles per hour).

The trading merchants of Ghana often became wealthy.
Map of Gold and Salt Trade

Western Africa

- Camels were used on the trade routes to carry goods.
- Salt was mined in the Sahara and traded for gold.
- Timbuktu had universities and libraries.
- Djenne was an important trade city.
- Gold mines in the western part of Mali were important for trade.

Legend:
- Salt mines
- Farming (onions, millet, tomatoes)
- Gold mines
- Cities
8. The greatest West African trading state was Mali, established in the mid-1200s by Sundiata Keita.

Extending from the Atlantic coast inland to the famous trading city of Timbuktu, Mali built its wealth and power on the gold-salt trade.

One of the richest and most powerful kings was Mansa Musa. He doubled the size of Mali and created a strong central government.

Once secure, he undertook – as a devout Muslim – to make a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Thousands of servants and soldiers joined him on this journey. Everywhere he went, Mansa Musa lavished gold gifts on his hosts and bought hundreds of items with gold. (He actually caused the value of gold to fall.)
The Haj of Mansa Musa

Salt was the critical southbound trade product. Needed for taste, nutrition, dehydration, and food preservation. It was literally worth its weight in gold.

Travel time from Walata to Taghaza was 20 days.

Walata was the southern endpoint of the western Sahara trade route.

Like several Mali kings before him, Mansa Musa followed existing trade routes to Cairo.

Southbound trade across the desert included copper, swords, paper, wheat, and spices.

Musa’s capital.

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Trading items:
- Copper
- Kola
- Gold
- Salt
- Ivory
- Slaves
Mansa Musa and Timbuktu

9. Mansa Musa was inspired to make Timbuktu a center of Islamic learning and culture. In Timbuktu he built mosques and libraries. He brought scholars to the city to study the Quran. Timbuktu became recognized as one of the intellectual capitals of the Muslim world. The city attracted religious leaders, scholars and artists from all over the Middle east and Africa.
Timbuktu
The Kingdom of Songhai

10. Songhai the Greatest African Empire

The first Songhai state benefited from the rich soil provided by the Niger river and the Muslim trade routes linking Arabia, North Africa and West Africa. Conquests of Timbuktu and Djenne, gave Songhai control of the trading empire based on gold and salt that had made Ghana and Mali so prosperous.

Songhai became an empire that stretched a thousand miles along the Niger River. It became the largest empire in African history.
Notes on the Slave Trade

• As the trade in slaves increased, millions of Africans were removed from their homes and shipped to plantations in the New World.

• Cane sugar had been introduced to the New World. Requires enormous labor. African slaves shipped to Portuguese and Spanish colonies.

• Altogether as many as ten million African slaves were brought to the Americas between the early 16th and late nineteenth centuries.
Slavery cont.

• **High death rate.** Many slaves died on the journey before arriving in the New World. Those who survived the Middle Passage often died from diseases to which they had little or no immunity.

• **African intermediaries** – merchants, members of local elites or rulers – were very active in the process.

• Effects included increased internal warfare and violence, destruction of local cottage industries and depopulation of areas.