Topic 2.4 – Trans-Saharan Trade Routes, Part 2
Thematic Focus: Governance (GOV)

Standards Table

Framework	Standard
AP World History: Modern	**Theme GOV:** Governments form, expand, and maintain power through various institutions and policies. **Unit 2 Learning Objective I:** Explain how the expansion of empires influenced trade and communication over time. **KC-3.1.I.E.ii:** Expansion of empires (such as **Mali**) facilitated Afro-Eurasian trade and communication as more people entered shared economic networks.
NCSS National Standards	*Power, Authority & Governance*; *Global Connections*.
Florida BEST SS Alignment	Analyze political structure and state expansion; evaluate government roles in economic systems.

Lesson Overview

As trans-Saharan trade grew after 1200, new states emerged whose power was deeply tied to desert commerce. The most important of these was the **Mali Empire**, which expanded in the early 13th century under the leadership of **Sundiata** and later reached extraordinary wealth during the reign of **Mansa Musa**. Mali controlled key sections of the Saharan trade routes linking West African goldfields to North African and Mediterranean markets. By taxing caravans, regulating merchants, and protecting trade corridors, Mali transformed long-distance exchange into political power.

Imperial expansion allowed Mali to integrate diverse peoples into a unified economy. Rulers established administrative centers in cities such as **Niani, Timbuktu, and Gao**, where officials supervised trade, diplomacy, and Islamic scholarship. With increased stability came increased economic activity: merchants could travel more safely, goods flowed more reliably, and communication networks expanded. Malian control over trade routes also encouraged the spread of **Islam**, which connected West Africa to a broader Afro-Eurasian intellectual and commercial world.

In this way, state expansion and governance helped shape trans-Saharan trade. Empire building strengthened communication across regions, while access to trade revenue helped rulers centralize power and administer larger territories. The Mali Empire demonstrates how government policies, military authority, taxation, and diplomacy intertwined with the expansion of economic networks.

Student Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:
- Explain how Malian imperial expansion strengthened trans-Saharan trade.
- Describe how governments used taxation, military protection, and diplomacy to control trade routes.
- Identify how imperial growth increased cultural and economic communication across Afro-Eurasia.
- Analyze primary sources to understand governance in West African empires.
- Connect state power to economic growth in the trans-Saharan network.

Essential Vocabulary (5 terms, student-friendly definitions)
1. **Empire** – A large political unit that controls many peoples and territories.
2. **Taxation** – A system in which governments collect money or goods from merchants or citizens.
3. **Caravan protection** – Military or legal support that keeps trade groups safe during travel.
4. **Diplomacy** – Managing political relationships between different states or groups.
5. **Centralization** – Bringing government power under the authority of a single ruler or state.

Background Reading

The Mali Empire rose in the early 1200s as smaller West African kingdoms were unified under **Sundiata**. This new central authority allowed Mali to regulate trade more effectively than earlier states like Ghana. Mali's rulers controlled major gold-producing regions, including **Bambuk**, **Bure**, and parts of the Niger River basin. Since West African gold was in high demand across the Islamic world and Europe, Mali became one of the wealthiest states of the medieval period.

To maintain this wealth, Mali developed strong administrative systems. Caravans traveling to and from Mali were taxed when passing through key cities or bridges. State forces protected desert routes from bandits, and officials supervised the weighing of gold and salt to ensure fairness. The rise of cities like **Timbuktu** and **Gao** further strengthened governance, as scholars, judges, and merchants created networks of literacy, Islamic law, and communication that connected Mali to the wider Afro-Eurasian world.

Mali's expansion had diplomatic consequences as well. Rulers formed ties with North African and Middle Eastern states, facilitated by the spread of **Islam** and the pilgrimage (hajj) tradition. The most famous example is **Mansa Musa's pilgrimage in 1324**, recorded in many sources. His journey showed Mali's wealth, increased diplomatic relationships, and encouraged further trade with Africa. This demonstrates how imperial expansion strengthened communication and trade networks across regions.

Primary Sources

Primary Source 1 — Al-Umari on Mansa Musa's Visit to Cairo (14th century)
Source: Fordham Internet Sourcebook
https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/mansamusa.asp
Al-Umari records secondhand reports of Mansa Musa's hajj. Musa arrived with so much gold that he altered local markets. The account emphasizes Mali's wealth and its connections to Islamic and Mediterranean trade networks. It also highlights Musa's diplomatic relationships and his empire's ability to marshal massive resources.

Primary Source 2 — Ibn Battuta on Governance in Mali (1352–1353)
Source: Fordham Internet Sourcebook
https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1354-ibnbattuta.asp

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Ibn Battuta describes Mali's administration, justice system, officials, and strict security over trade routes. He notes that theft was rare, caravans were safe, and rulers regulated commercial activity. His account demonstrates how governance supported trade and communication in the empire.

Guided Source Analysis Questions
Source 1 — Al-Umari
1. What does the description of Mansa Musa's wealth suggest about the economic power of the Mali Empire?
2. How does the pilgrimage reflect Mali's connection to Afro-Eurasian trade networks?
3. What political messages might Musa have intended through his display of wealth?

Source 2 — Ibn Battuta
1. What details indicate that Mali maintained strong government control and security?
2. How did these governance practices support trade and communication?
3. What does Battuta's account reveal about the relationship between rulers and merchants?

AP Skill-Aligned Activity
Governance and Trade Systems Chart

Governance Practice	Purpose	Effect on Trade/Communication	Evidence (Source or Lesson)
Caravan taxation	Generate revenue	Strengthened state & funded expansion	Al-Umari on Musa's wealth
Route protection	Ensure safety	Encouraged long-distance trade	Ibn Battuta on security
Administrative centers	Centralize control	Improved communication & record-keeping	Timbuktu, Gao
Diplomatic ties	Build alliances	Increased cross-regional networks	Musa's hajj
Islamic law & literacy	Standardize commerce	Unified cultural & economic systems	Mali judges, scholars

Write **4–6 sentences** explaining how Mali's government expanded trade networks.

Key Table
How Empires Influenced Trans-Saharan Trade

Imperial Action	Result
Taxing caravans	Wealth accumulation & expansion of state power
Protecting routes	Increased merchant travel & communication
Building cities	Created hubs for trade, scholarship, and diplomacy
Adopting Islam	Linked Mali to global Islamic networks
Diplomacy with North Africa	Strengthened interregional economic ties

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CCOT / Comparison / Causation Section
Causation
- Expansion of Mali → safer routes → increased trade
- State taxation → strengthened rulers → expansion of bureaucracy
- Islamic governance → unified legal systems across regions

Comparison
Mali vs. Mongol Empire:
- Both expanded trade networks across regions
- Both protected routes and supported merchants
- Mongols used relay stations (yam); Mali used caravans and oases

CCOT
Continuities:
- Sahara remained a key gold-salt corridor
- Islamic influence guided diplomacy and trade
Changes:
- Mali centralized power more than earlier West African kingdoms
- Communication with North Africa increased due to governance and Islam

Student Writing Task — Short Response
Prompt:
In 8–10 sentences, explain how the expansion of the Mali Empire influenced trade and communication across Afro-Eurasia.
Use at least **one** primary source as evidence.
Include:
- Clear claim
- Evidence from Al-Umari or Battuta
- Reasoning linking governance to trade networks

Key Takeaways
- Mali's expansion strengthened trans-Saharan trade by protecting routes and taxing caravans.
- Government stability encouraged merchants to travel safely.
- Islam linked Mali to the larger Afro-Eurasian world and facilitated communication.
- Diplomatic acts like Mansa Musa's pilgrimage expanded global awareness of West Africa.
- Strong governance transformed Mali into a major commercial and cultural center.

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