

# What Is Currency?

## Lessons from Historic Africa

In modern society, trade transactions are often hidden in computers behind the doors of banks and mail-order companies. It is possible to buy a house, a ticket, or even a pair of shoes without ever meeting the seller face-to-face or passing money from one hand to another. To understand the meaning of **currency** and to appreciate why precise **weights** and **measures** were once necessary for fair trade, it is useful to examine trade practices in Africa several hundred years ago when trading transactions were quite visible and direct.

For more than four-hundred years, the Akan people of Ghana in West Africa used a currency based on tiny grains of gold called *gold-dust*. This very desirable currency made the Akan a valued trading partner to North African traders who crossed the Sahara Desert by camel caravan and to sea-faring Europeans who arrived on Africa's Atlantic Coast in ships laden with goods. The Akan were able to enrich their own lives by trading for goods with people of vastly different climates and cultures.

These lessons explore the monetary system of the Akan. Exploring the historic role of gold-dust in African trade will help students understand the basic idea of currency and give new significance to the nickels, dimes, and quarters in their own pockets. [more essay...](#)



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***What Is Currency? Lessons from Historic Africa* covers the following**

**Subjects:**  
Economics  
Geography  
World History  
Mathematics

**Standards:**  
[This lesson matches Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory \(McREL\) educational standards.](#)

**Grades:**  
3-8

*Dedicated to the memory of Philip L. Ravenhill*

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## Trading Gold for Salt

If you could choose between a pile of salt and a pile of gold, you would probably choose the gold. After all, you know that you can always buy a container of salt for about forty-five cents at the local supermarket. But what if you could not easily get salt, and without it you could not survive? In fact, throughout history salt has been very difficult to obtain in many parts of the world, and people feared a lack of salt the way we in the industrialized world fear a shortage of fuel oil.

Once cultures began relying on grain, vegetable, or boiled meat diets instead of mainly hunting and eating roasted meat, adding salt to food became an absolute necessity for maintaining life.

Because the Akan lived in the forests of West Africa, they had few natural resources for salt and always needed to trade for it. Gold, however, was much easier to come by. Every Akan knew how to find tiny grains of gold sparkling in the river beds after a rainfall. The people who lived in the desert of North Africa could easily mine salt, but not gold. They craved the precious metal that would add so much to their personal splendor and prestige. These mutual needs led to the establishment of long-distance trade routes that connected very different cultures.

Camel caravans from North Africa carried bars of salt as well as cloth, tobacco, and metal tools across the Sahara to trading centers like Djenne and Timbuktu on the Niger River. Some items for which the salt was traded include gold, ivory, slaves, skins, kola nuts, pepper, and sugar.



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## Mining the Gold

### How did the Akan people find gold?

The Akan knew that the rainy season produced small particles of gold in the river beds. Occasionally larger gold nuggets were mixed in with the gravel. The digging season lasted only about seventy-five days until torrential rains and flooding made mining too dangerous to continue. During March and April, whole families joined in the mining operation. Women and children panned for gold in puddles near the river's edge. Men dove into the river or climbed down shafts dug into the earth.

Mining was dangerous and arduous work which yielded small quantities of gold, according to today's standards. A fortunate worker might have mined a 1/2 gram of gold after a day's work--the weight of half of one M&M candy. Over the course of one digging season, a worker would gather about one ounce of gold-dust.

### How did the Akan get the gold out of the ground?

Women panned for gold in puddles near streams where grains of gold were mixed in with the grains of sand. They used pans or bowls which had been stained black to make the shiny grains of gold more obvious. They followed these steps:

1. The panners collected earth or sand in the largest wooden pan and mixed it with water. They stirred or shook the mixture with a swirling motion, letting the heavy grains of gold and bits of dirt and sand sink to the bottom.
2. They poured off the water and picked out as much of the sand as possible. Then they added more water and repeated the entire stirring and pouring off process many times, using smaller and smaller bowls, until the water was pure.
3. When the panning was done, the women inspected the residue carefully, picking out the grains of gold with a feather and storing them in a quill or a snail shell.

It is said that a good panner could process up to five-hundred pounds of soil per day. In less than an hour, a very skilled panner working in a very ordinary puddle could extract enough gold dust to cover a fingernail.

While women panned, men searched for gold in deep shafts dug into the earth. This work was very dangerous because no attempt was made to shore up the shafts. Many miners lost their lives when heavy rains caused the shafts to collapse around them. The successful miner followed these steps:

1. The miners dug a narrow shaft deep into the ground with an iron hoe. The shaft was only about two feet in diameter--barely enough room for a man to turn around--and as much as thirty to sixty feet deep. The miners cut footholds into the side of the shaft so that they could climb in and out.
2. They squatted down at the bottom of the shaft and used the hoe to scrape earth into a calabash (bowl). A miner was often up to his waist in water that had collected in the bottom of the shaft.
3. The workers at the top of the shaft hauled up the full calabash and dumped the earth out onto the ground. The earth was allowed to dry out in the sun so that it could be crushed into a powder, washed, and inspected for gold-dust.

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## Using Gold-Dust as Money

Until the nineteenth century, the Akan used grains of gold-dust, as well as objects such as cowrie shells, as their medium of exchange. The Akan didn't use price tags, the way we do today, to indicate how much an item cost. Instead, they determined the price by using a system of brass *weights* and *scales*. This system had come to the Akan by way of the Islamic North African camel caravans that did business at the trading centers of Djenne and Timbuktu. From there the system spread south to the Akan.



### Equipment

The buyer and the seller each brought his own weight bags to carry out a transaction. Inside was a small scale, a spoon, and bronze weights of varying sizes. The buyer had a metal box containing a tiny amount of gold-dust wrapped up in a small piece of cloth and secured with a knot.

### Negotiation

Because no prices were set, all prices were negotiated with a series of offers and counter-offers. To start off, the seller, hoping to get a high price, would pull a heavy brass weight out of his weight bag. The buyer, who hoped to pay less than what was being asked, pulled a lesser brass weight out of his bag. The two bargained back and forth, each producing additional or alternative brass weights, until they finally agreed which weight would determine the amount of gold-dust to be paid.

### Weighing

At this point, the buyer opened the cloth in which his gold-dust was carefully wrapped. He measured a small amount of gold-dust onto the scale, adjusting it with a spoon until the weight balanced. Then the seller reweighed the gold-dust with his own weights and scales to make sure that the transaction was fair.

### Akan weights

Akan metalsmiths produced about four million weights over several centuries. These weights were small, compact, durable, and easy to carry around. They did not break or lose their weight value unless someone tampered with them.

A set of weights progressed from lightest to heaviest. Several weights could be placed on the scale at once. A common person owned just a few weights while a rich one might have owned close to sixty.



Akan weights are of two types. One is a geometric weight, the other depicts familiar figures or objects such as antelopes, chickens, snakes, crocodiles, birds, fish, insects, seeds, weapons, tools, and even people.

Outsiders may find the Akan weights confusing, because their appearance has nothing to do with their assigned weight. We cannot tell how heavy a weight is simply by looking at it. A bird and a fish might have the same weight, but two birds that look exactly the same might have different weights.

Many Akan weights are associated with proverbs. The Akan like to use [proverbs](#) in their everyday speech to communicate ideas or feelings that



might be considered impolite if stated more directly.

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## Trading with Europeans

In the fifteenth century, ships from seafaring European nations began to arrive on Africa's Gold Coast. The Portuguese arrived first and established a fort on the coast where they traded solid brass ingots called *manillas* in exchange for Akan gold and slaves. The Akan melted the manillas down and recast them into objects for their own use.

Not long after the Portuguese established trade with the Akan, gold-seekers from Holland and England arrived, followed by traders from Sweden, Denmark, and France. The Akan bought many things from the Europeans including pigeons, chickens, pigs, sheep, sugar cane, pineapples, bananas, oranges, red peppers, tobacco, guns, gunpowder, tools, eye-glasses, cloth, carpets, hats, lace, paper, liquor, brass locks, bells, bugles, and glass beads.

### Trade competition

All traders, Akan and European alike, operated out of self-interest and tried to establish trade rules and procedures that would increase their own profits. Shipowners from European nations vied fiercely with each other, hoping to acquire sole trading rights and sole access to Akan gold.



*Manilla is Portuguese for "bracelet for the hand." Used as currency, a manilla is a C-shaped brass ingot that comes in a variety of sizes and weights.*

### Tolls and tributes

The Akan increased their trade earnings by collecting tolls from European ships anchored off their coast. They also collected rents from the Europeans who operated trading forts along the coastline.

### Coins replace gold-dust currency

By the mid-1800s the Akan began using coins as currency. Their four-hundred-year-old tradition of trading with gold-dust could not keep pace in a faster-moving world. Foreign traders did not want to spend several hours negotiating every transaction with weights and scales. As the Akan modernized, their weights gradually lost their usefulness and the gold-dust system faded into the past.



*This handa is a form of currency from Congo that is made of copper.*

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# Why Use Money? Getting What We Need

## Objectives

- Understand the difference between purchase, barter, and payment for service.
- Learn how the Akan and the North African people used a barter system to exchange gold and salt.
- Identify the most efficient ways of procuring your everyday needs.

## Materials

- Paper
- Pencil
- Map

## Subjects

- Social studies, economics

## Procedure

1. Ask students to discuss the respective values of gold and salt. Discuss the reasons that the Akan wanted salt and the North Africans wanted gold. Use a map to show where each group lived. Explain that trade routes linked the desert and the Gold Coast.

2. Make a needs chart. In the first column, have students list their most critical needs in the hour or two between the time they wake up and the time they arrive at school. Their list might include food, clothing, utilities (electricity, water, heat), soap, containers (book bag, lunch box), radio, transportation (bicycle, car, bus, gasoline), books, lunch, calculator.

In the second column, have students write down how they obtain these items or services. Discuss which items or services require multiple transactions before they reach the students. For example, their morning orange juice was purchased at a store. The store managers purchased the juice from a corporation that transforms oranges into orange juice and packages it for sale. The food corporation bought the oranges from orange growers.

In the third column, students should note *all possible ways* of obtaining each of the goods and services on their needs chart. Possible ways might be (a) purchase with money or a credit card (b) barter (offer another object in trade) (c) offer service instead of money (d) make it yourself. Discuss the potential problems inherent in each type of transaction. Which seems to be the most efficient method?

3. Study these classified ads written by three different people needing housing. Which househunter is offering money? Who wants a barter agreement? Who is offering service in exchange for a place to live?

**Out-of-town grand-mother** wishes to house sit during winter. Please call Mary, \_\_\_/\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_.

**Single male** visiting area seeks simple room. October 3-13 for \$10-\$30 per night. Call \_\_\_/\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_.

**Wanna Swap?** Washington, D.C., commuter looking for a furnished place to stay during the week in exchange for a beautifully furnished two-bedroom condo on the beach. Call \_\_\_/\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_.

Have each student write a comical classified ad for something he or she wants or needs. The ad should reveal what cash, barter, or service arrangement the student will offer as payment.

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# What Shape Is Money? Money Doesn't Have to Be Round or Rectangular

## Objectives

- Understand that many kinds of objects have been used as money.
- Identify qualities that make a good currency.
- Design a nontraditional currency and decide on its value.

## Materials

- Photograph of a [handa](#)
- Assorted classroom objects
- [Requirements of a Good Currency chart](#)
- Take-home page: [Design Your Own Currency](#) (Trabajo para hacer en la casa: [Diseña Tu Propio Dinero](#))

## Subjects

- Social studies, economics, math

## Procedure

1. Inform students that throughout history various cultures have used currencies that we may consider highly unusual: pigs, shells, cattle, rice, kola nuts, salt, rice or grain, beads, teeth, eggs, feathers, coconuts, beans, camels, furs, blankets, snails, drums, and more.

2. As a class, make a list of [Requirements of a Good Currency](#). The list might include some of these features:

- Portable--can fit in a pocket
- Lightweight
- Nonperishable--won't rot
- Strong and durable--won't crush, rip, crack, break off, or bend out of shape
- Can get wet without being ruined
- Can be produced in standard sizes so that any two pieces are identical
- Can be marked or made in different sizes to show different values (such as \$1, \$5, or \$10 bill)
- Can be easily stacked or stored
- Cannot be forged, adulterated, or thinned to lessen its value
- Supply is large enough to be available to everyone
- Supply is limited enough to preserve its value
- All users believe in its value and agree to trade with it

3. Show students the photograph of the [handa](#), a solid-copper currency used in the Congo in Africa. The handa is approximately nine by six inches. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using the handa as currency in today's United States. Which of the requirements on their [Requirements of a Good Currency](#) list does a handa fulfill?

4. Design a nontraditional classroom currency. Make a list of items you find in the classroom or around school that might be used as a currency. Consider items such as rubber bands, erasers, books, chalk, bottle caps, stones, sand, etc. Use the [worksheet](#) to compare the advantages and disadvantages of seven of the items you listed.

Select the best currency for your class. Decide on the value of the classroom currency you have

chosen. Issue a certain amount of classroom currency and put it into a container. Decide how to protect it so that it is not tampered with or stolen. Decide what must be done to earn the classroom currency. Allow students to use it to purchase special privileges.

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## Handa

This handa is a form of currency from Congo that is made of copper. It is approximately 9" long by 6" wide.



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# Worksheet: Requirements of a Good Currency

REQUIREMENTS	Paper clip	Leaf					
<b>Portable</b>							
<b>Lightweight</b>							
<b>Nonperishable</b>							
<b>Strong and durable</b>							
<b>Can get wet</b>							
<b>Exists in standard sizes</b>							
<b>Cannot be cheapened or thinned</b>							
<b>Cannot be counerfeited</b>							
<b>Supply is large enough</b>							
<b>Supply is limited enough</b>							
<b>Additional advantages</b>							
<b>Additional disadvantages</b>							

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## Design Your Own Currency

**Teacher's Note: This activity was originally designed to use as a take-home assignment but the online version of this page can be adapted for classroom use.**

Today many people prefer to pay for their purchases with a bank check or credit card rather than with dollar bills and coins.

Dollar bills and coins are in constant circulation, always changing hands. Since we don't put our names or addresses on them, we have no idea where the bills and coins in our pockets have been in the last year.

Bank checks and credit cards allow us to buy items without having actual money in hand at the moment we are making our purchase. They also allow us to make purchases through the mail or by telephone. With this system, we pay money to a bank and the bank pays the person who sold the items to us. Unlike coins and bills, checks and credit cards carry our name and the special account number the bank assigns to us. Nobody else is allowed to use them. Ask your parents to show you a check, a credit card, a bank account statement, and a credit card statement that records their transactions.

Compare a coin, bill, check, and credit card. Look for these features:

- Date it was issued
- Your parent's name
- Your parent's address
- Name of our country
- Denomination (how much it's worth)
- Your parent's account number
- Name of a bank
- Serial number
- Expiration date (time when it runs out and has to be replaced)
- Motto
- Place to write a signature
- Decoration

Most coins, bills, checks, and credit cards have some decoration. Design your own currency in the space provided.

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## Trabajo Para Hacer en la Casa

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# Diseña Tu Propio Dinero

Hoy en día, muchas personas prefieren pagar sus compras con un cheque o una tarjeta de crédito en vez de dinero en efectivo (billetes o monedas).

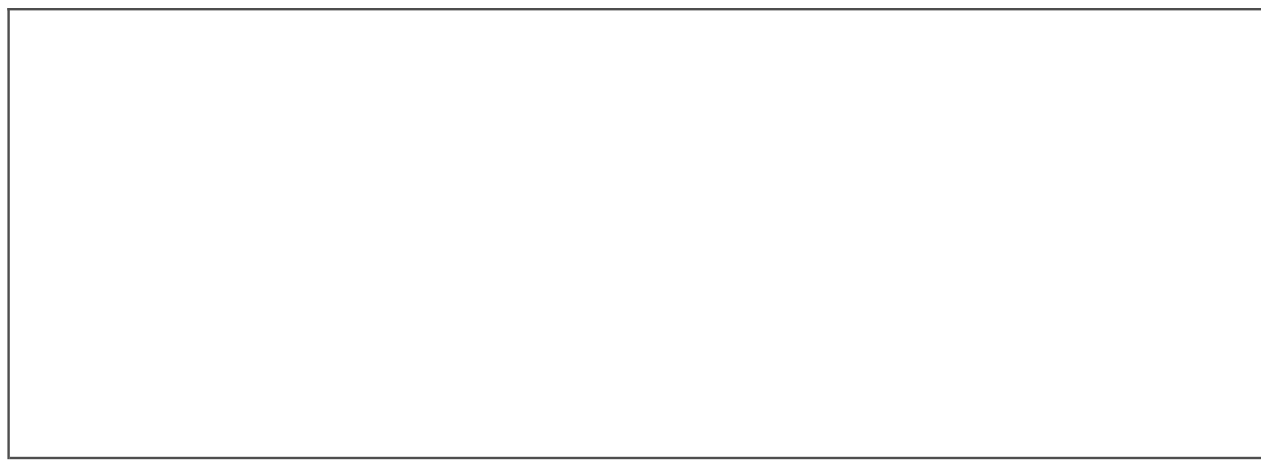
Los billetes y las monedas circulan constantemente, cambiando de mano en mano. No tenemos idea en donde el dinero a estado durante el último año.

Los cheques y las tarjetas de crédito nos permiten comprar sin tener dinero en efectivo al momento de la compra. También nos permiten comprar por correo o por teléfono. Con este sistema, nosotros le pagamos dinero al banco y el banco le paga a las personas que nos han vendido algo. Los cheques y las tarjetas de crédito, a diferencia del dinero en efectivo, tienen el nombre del propietario de la misma y el número de la cuenta que el banco le asigna. Nadie más puede usarlos. Pídele a tus padres que te enseñen un cheque, una tarjeta de crédito, el informe sobre el estado de la cuenta bancaria o un informe indicando las transacciones que se han hecho con la tarjeta de crédito.

Compara una moneda, un billete, un cheque bancario y una tarjeta de crédito. Busca estas características:

- La fecha de emisión
- El nombre de tu papá o tu mamá
- La dirección de tu papá o tu mamá
- El nombre del país
- La denominación (el valor del dinero)
- El número de cuenta
- El nombre del banco
- El número de serie
- La fecha en que expira
- El lema
- El lugar para la firma
- El diseño

Las monedas, billetes, cheques y tarjetas de crédito tienen diseños diferentes. Tu puedes diseñar tu propio dinero en este espacio.



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# What's It Worth? Thinking About Weights and Measures

## Objectives

- Learn that weights and measures can be used to assess value.
- Learn that traders must be wary of fraudulent practices.
- Appreciate the Akan weights as works of art.

## Materials

- [Drawing of Akan scale](#)
- Supermarket advertisements or household catalogue
- A balance scale
- Your classroom currency from [Lesson 2](#)
- Art supplies (see Procedure 7.)

## Subjects

- Social studies, science, economics, math

## Procedure

1. Explain how the Akan traded with gold-dust using weights and scales. Show students a drawing of an Akan scale and describe how traders placed the weights on it. Describe the buying and selling activity. Explain why a single transaction might take several hours of negotiating with the weights as buyer and seller tried to settle on a fair price.
2. Discuss whether gold-dust meets the currency requirements you established in [Lesson 2](#).
3. Discuss how equipment for handling money depends on the type of currency we use. Make a list of all the equipment we use today (such as cash registers and candy machines with slots for coins) that would be useless if we traded with gold-dust.
4. Show the bronze [porcupine weight](#). Sketch it using the proper dimensions (1 7/8 by 3 1/16 inches) so that students have an accurate idea of its actual size. Explain that many Akan weights are associated with proverbs. Discuss the meaning of the porcupine proverbs.
5. Discuss how our society uses scales to determine value. Ask students to look at packaged food and nonfood items in their own kitchens and determine which ones are sold by weight. Ask students to bring in a supermarket circular or a catalogue for household items. Ask them to identify different systems of measuring and pricing. Decide which of the systems listed below is used most often in today's stores:
  - Items sold by weight (such as 1 lb. 6 oz.)
  - Items sold by size (such as small, medium, large)
  - Items sold by quantity (such as package of three for \$5)
  - Items sold by quality (such as "good" for \$4; "best" for \$6)
6. Purchase or build with containers a balance scale for weighing your class currency. You can make an Akan-style scale with plastic pails or foil pie tins suspended from a stick by strings, or you can use a self-standing scale. Check your scale's accuracy. Do nine single paper clips chosen at random balance three chains of three paper clips? (They should.) Do any six rocks chosen at random balance any other six rocks? (They probably won't.)

7. Ask each student to build his/her own weight in the shape of an animal or an easily identifiable object. If your classroom currency is very light, you might make the weights out of something light like styrofoam. If your classroom currency is heavy, you might make the weights out of clay. Students might compose proverbs for their weights.

Ask each student to make his/her weight exactly equal to some multiple of your class currency. (For example, one weight might equal twenty large paper clips and seven small paper clips.) Each student should inform the teacher of the equivalence but keep it a secret from the other students. Have students use the scale to figure out the equivalence of each student's weight.

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## Drawing of an Akan Scale

The Akan scale hangs from the fingers by means of a cord tied around the middle of a stick. One dish holds the weights, the other dish holds the gold. The gold must balance equally with the agreed-upon weights.



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## Porcupine Weight

This porcupine weight is approximately  $3 \frac{1}{16}$ " long by  $1 \frac{7}{8}$ " high.



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## Books And Teaching Guides

### On the history of money

- Burns, Peggy. *Stepping Through History: Money* . New York: Thomson Learning, 1995.

### On weights and measures

- Bendick, Jeanne. *How Much & How Many: The Story of Weights and Measures* . New York: Franklin Watts, 1989.

### On Akan weights

- Garrard, Timothy F. *Akan Weights and the Gold Trade* . London and New York: Longman Group Limited, 1980.
- Garrard, Timothy F. *Gold of Africa: Jewellery and Ornaments from Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Senegal* . Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1989.
- Nitecki, Andre. *Equal Measure for Kings and Commoners: Goldweights of the Akan from the Collections of the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Canada* . Calgary, Canada: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1982.

## Electronic Resources

*Cutting to the Essence-Shaping for the Fire* , (<http://www.fa.indiana.edu/~conner/akan/shape.html>) is an online exhibit from the Lakeview Museum of Arts and Sciences in Peoria, Illinois, of Yoruba and Akan art in wood and metal. It provides detailed information about Akan history and the gold trade; how gold is mined, cast, carried, and traded; and explains the symbolism behind some goldweight shapes.

Ghana information from the University of Pennsylvania's African Studies Website:

[http://www.sas.upenn.edu/African\\_Studies/Country\\_Specific/Ghana.html](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/Country_Specific/Ghana.html)

The Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory (MCREL) educational standards are online at <http://www.mcrel.org/index.html>. Two additional lesson plans about African history and geography, and currency exchange are on the site:

*Currency Exchange and the Gang of Fifteen* , a grades 4-10 lesson plan designed to help students understand and calculate currency exchange rates: <http://www.mcrel.org/connect/plus/exchange.html>

*Unfolding the Mystery of Timbuktu* , a historical geography lesson unit where students follow the changes in the ancient African city of Timbuktu from its founding to today: <http://www.mcrel.org/connect/plus/timbuktu.html>

The Core Knowledge Foundation offers *Africa: A Cultural Safari* , a grade 4 lesson plan about the rise and fall of the kingdoms of West Africa and the cultural contributions of the African people:

<http://www.coreknowledge.org/CKproto2/resrcs/lessons/4AFRICA2.htm>

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