
Mansa Musa's *Hajj*: A Personal Journal



CV

Overview: In 1324 CE, a caravan of as many as 60,000 people left Niani, the old capital of Mali in West Africa. They were heading to the Muslim holy city of Mecca, nearly 4,000 miles away. The leader of this journey was the ruler of Mali, Mansa Musa. The epic *hajj*, or pilgrimage, would spread the African king's name far and wide. This Mini-Q asks you to envision yourself as part of Mansa Musa's magnificent caravan and to record your experiences at different points on the journey.

The Documents:

- Document A The *Hajj* by the Numbers
- Document B: West Africa Trade (map)
- Document C: The Village of Taghaza
- Document D: Verses from the Qur'an
- Document E: Mansa Musa's arrival in Cairo
- Document F: The Catalan Atlas

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Mansa Musa's *Hajj*: Remembering the Journey

In 1324 CE, an enormous **caravan** left Niani, the capital of Mali in West Africa. The sprawling mass of people, pack animals and gear was on its way to Mecca in Arabia, nearly 4,000 miles across the desert. Leading the caravan was the king himself, Mansa Musa. He was a Muslim, and making a *hajj*, or pilgrimage, to Mecca was an important duty of Islam.

We don't know exact details of Mansa Musa's life. West African societies relied greatly on oral history instead of written records. Griots ("gree-ohs"), or storytellers, have passed down West African history through generations. From their stories, we know that a king named Sundiata ("soon-jah-tuh") founded Mali in about 1230 CE. During his rule, Sundiata took control of the region's gold and salt trade. Historians don't know if Sundiata was a Muslim, but his heir and grandnephew, Musa, was. When Musa took the throne around 1312, he received the title of **mansa**, which means "sultan" or "king." He would rule until his death in 1337.

Although the kingdom of Mali was already large, Mansa Musa increased its size. To rule more effectively, he divided his vast empire into provinces. Each had a *ferba*, or governor, who ruled according to Mansa Musa's orders. The griots say Mansa Musa maintained a large standing army to assure his safety and that of his people. Mansa Musa also increased the wealth of Mali, expanding the gold and salt trade and encouraging copper trade with Egypt.

At the peak of his success, in 1324, Mansa Musa set out on his *hajj*. To get to Mecca and back, the pilgrimage had to make two crossings of the **Sahara**, which stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea—an area larger than the continental United States. (The word "Sahara"

means "desert" in Arabic, which is why we don't use the name Sahara Desert.) Compared to the **savanna** they were used to, the Sahara must have been a barren and terrifying landscape to the pilgrims on the *hajj*.

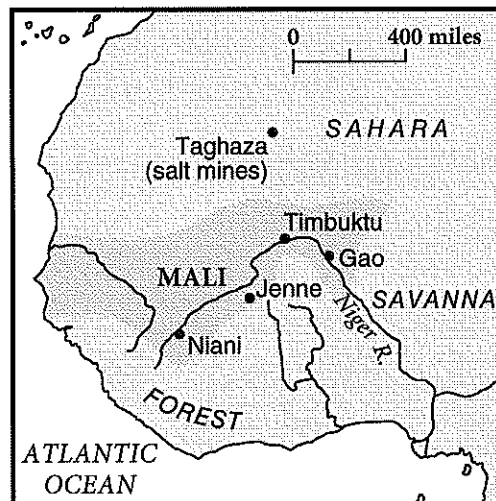
Stories passed down by griots say that as many as 60,000 people accompanied Musa on this journey, a number that is probably high. Nonetheless, for years after the *hajj*, stories about the great journey spread through Africa, Arabia, and Europe. Today much of our knowledge comes from a handful of Arabic writers

and travelers who crossed paths with Mansa Musa in Cairo or who visited Saharan trade towns a few years after the *hajj* passed through. Two of these accounts are included in this Mini-Q.

You now have a chance to become part of this historic caravan. Using the voice of the traveler you chose in the Hook Exercise, record your thoughts about

the journey. The documents that follow will provide material for the six journal entries you will write. Be creative, but be factual, too.

It's just after dawn on the day of departure. Morning prayers are finished, and the camels are bellowing. Are you ready to leave? You are nervous, but excited, too. It's an honor to travel with the king on this important religious journey. You hope that Allah guides you safely to Mecca and back. In the meantime, you will do your best to record everything that happens along the way.



Document A

Source: Chart compiled from various sources.

Note: Many of these numbers are rough estimates drawn from oral history and a few written records.

Mansa Musa's *Hajj* by the Numbers

Number of people on the <i>hajj</i>	60,000
Number of slaves who were Mansa Musa's personal servants	12,000
Number of slaves who carried gold	500
Number of miles traveled	4,000
Time it took to cross Mali on a donkey	4 months
Number of camels	1,000
Number of camels to carry gold	80-100
Amount of gold on each camel	100-300 pounds
Distance a camel can travel without water	100 miles
Distance a loaded camel can travel in a day	20-25 miles
Total amount of gold (for alms giving, gifts, salaries, supplies)	24,000 pounds
People in the caravan (in addition to Hook Exercise personae)	musicians, royal guards, flag bearers, doctors, teachers

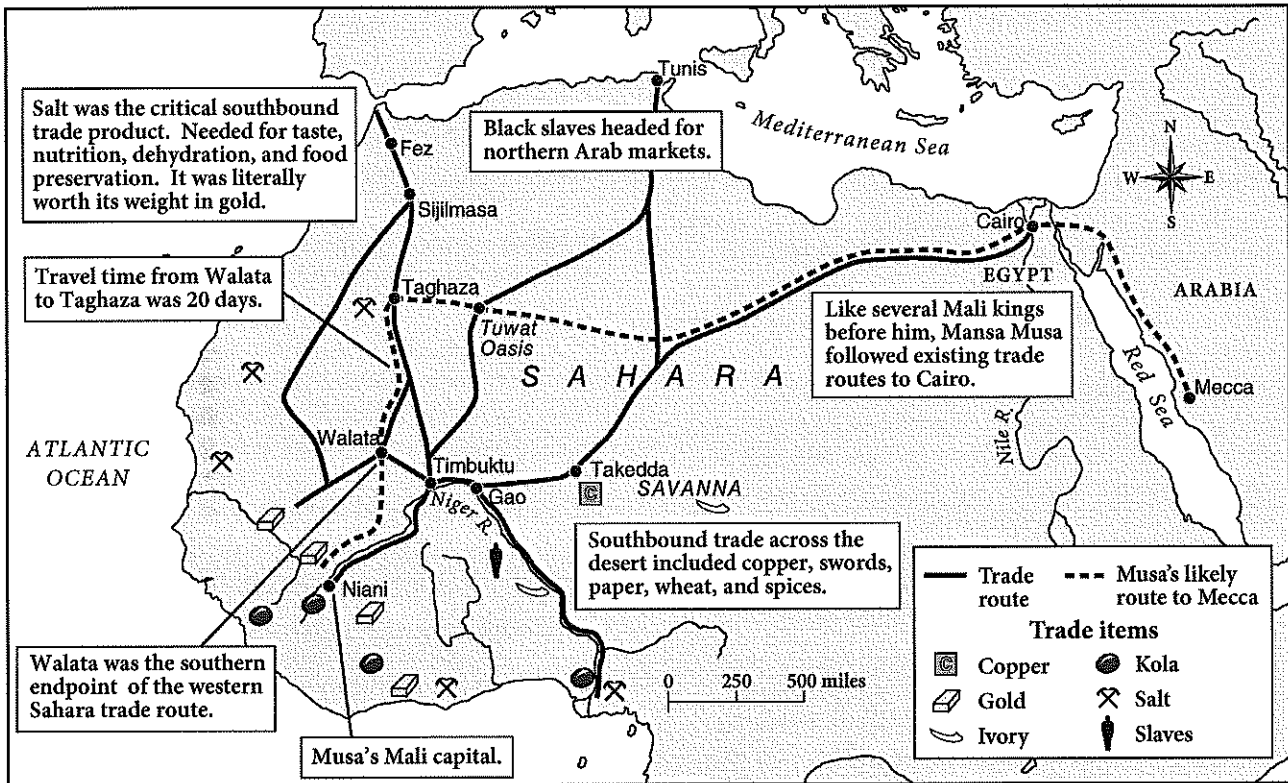
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Writing Journal Entry #1: Label your entry "Niani, 1324, Morning."

It is early on the day you are to set off on the *hajj* with Mansa Musa. The number of travelers and animals is staggering. You will be following the trade route headed northeast across the grasslands to Walata, a good 600 miles away. You move to your position near the head of the caravan. What are your thoughts as you wait to leave? Be sure to include references from the document to support your writing.

Document B

Source: Map created from various sources.



Writing Journal Entry #2: Label your journal entry “Walata, 1324, Morning.”

The caravan now stretches several days ahead of you and several days behind. Thank Allah for the water in this oasis town. Your next leg to Taghaza will be across waterless desert, and the water supply is critical. Luckily, the rainy season is beginning, although rainfall will be spotty at best. You are impressed by the trade activity in town. Blacks from the Sudan to the south meet with Berbers from northern Africa to exchange their goods. You sit in the shade of a date palm to record your thoughts and impressions.

Document C

Source: Ibn Battuta, *Rihla*, 1356. (*Rihla* means “journey” in Arabic.)

Note: Some historians believe that, after leaving Walata, Mansa Musa’s *hajj* made the difficult trip north to Taghaza. We have no record of Mansa Musa’s stay in Taghaza, but we do have a description of the place from the famous Arab scholar and traveler Ibn Battuta (“ib-n baa-tu-tah”), who visited Taghaza in 1352. This is 28 years after Mansa Musa would have passed through.

This is a village with nothing good about it. One of its marvels is that its houses and its mosque are of rock salt and its roofs of camel skins. It has no trees, but is nothing but sand with a salt mine. They dig in the earth for the salt, which is found in great slabs lying one upon the other as though they have been shaped and placed underground. A camel carries two slabs of it. Nobody lives there except the slaves of the Masufa who dig for the salt. They live on the dates imported to them [from Morocco] and on camel meat. . . . The Sudan [black peoples from the gold-producing forest lands to the south] come to them from their land and carry the salt away. One load of it sold at the city of [Niani] for 30 or 20 mithqals [of gold].

The Sudan use salt for currency as gold and silver is used. They cut it into pieces and use it for their transactions. Despite the meanness [desolation] of the village of Taghaza they deal with [quantity] upon [quantity] of gold there.

We stayed there for ten days, under strain because the water there is brackish [salty]. It is the most fly-ridden of places.

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Writing Journal Entry #3: Label your journal entry “Taghaza, 1324, dusk.”

As you make camp in Taghaza, you hear grumblings in the *hajj*. Questions are being asked about the route taken north. Aren’t there other ways to get across the Sahara? You are both intimidated and fascinated by this town literally made of salt. What do you think of it? How do *you* feel about the route the *hajj* has taken?

Document D

Source: Verses from the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book.

Note: Although Mansa Musa was a Muslim, he did not require his citizens to be Muslims. Most historians believe this was because many people in the empire still practiced traditional African religions; Islam was the religion of traders and the court. Many of the slaves and soldiers on the trip were likely not Muslim and would not have made the final trek from Cairo to Mecca. For Mansa Musa, however, the verses below would have had great meaning.

Give generously for the cause of God and do not with your own hands cast yourselves into destruction. Be charitable. God loves the charitable. **2:195**

Make the pilgrimage [*hajj*] and visit the Sacred House for His sake. If you cannot, send such offerings as you can afford and do not shave your heads until the offerings have reached their destination. . . . **2:196**

Make the pilgrimage in the appointed months. He that intends to perform it in those months must abstain from...obscene language, and acrimonious [angry] disputes while on pilgrimage. God is

aware of whatever good you do. Provide well for yourselves: the best provision is piety [devotion to faith]. Fear Me, then, you that are endowed with understanding. **2:197**

To be charitable in public is good, but to give alms [gifts of charity] to the poor in private is better and will atone for some of your sins. God has knowledge of all your actions. **2:271**

Those that give alms by night and by day, in private and in public, shall be rewarded by their Lord. They shall have nothing to fear or to regret. **2:274**

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Writing Journal Entry #4: Label your entry "Tuwat Oasis, 1324, Evening."

You have traveled more than 1,500 miles with the caravan. Today as you journeyed, you overheard several pilgrims discussing what the Qur'an teaches about the duties that Muslims must perform. You sit down to record your experiences and thoughts about the *hajj* so far. How do you think this journey relates to the teachings of Islam? Be sure to include references from the document to support your writing.

Document E

Source: Al-Umari, *Masalik al-Absar*, 1337-1338.

Note: Al-Umari was an Arab scholar and the son of a Cairo official. He did not meet Mansa Musa when the *hajj* arrived in Cairo in December 1324, but several years afterward he interviewed people who had. He included their observations in his encyclopedia *Masalik-al-Absar*, excerpted below.

From the beginning of my coming to stay in Egypt I heard talk of the arrival of this sultan Musa on his Pilgrimage and found the Cairenes [people of Cairo] eager to recount what they had seen of the Africans' prodigal [wasteful] spending. I asked the emir Abu ... and he told me of the opulence [luxury; extreme wealth], manly virtues, and piety of his sultan [king]. "When I went out to meet him, that is, on behalf of the mighty [Egyptian] sultan al-Malik al-Nasir, he did me extreme honour and treated me with the greatest courtesy.... Then he forwarded to the royal treasury many loads of unworked native gold and other valuables. I tried to persuade him to go up to the Citadel to meet the sultan, but he refused persistently saying: 'I came for the Pilgrimage and nothing else. I do not wish to mix anything else with my Pilgrimage.' He had begun to use this argument but I realized

that [meeting the sultan] was repugnant to him because he would be obliged to kiss the ground and the sultan's hand. I continued to cajole him and he continued to make excuses but the sultan's protocol demanded that I should bring him into the royal presence, so I kept on at him till he agreed...."

This man [Mansa Musa] flooded Cairo with his benefactions [gifts]. He left no court emir nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold. The [people of Cairo] made incalculable profits out of him and his suite in buying and selling and giving and taking. They exchanged gold until they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its price to fall.... This has been the state of affairs for about twelve years until this day by reason of the large amount of gold which they brought into Egypt and spent there.

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Writing Journal Entry #5: Label your journal entry "Cairo, 1324, Afternoon."

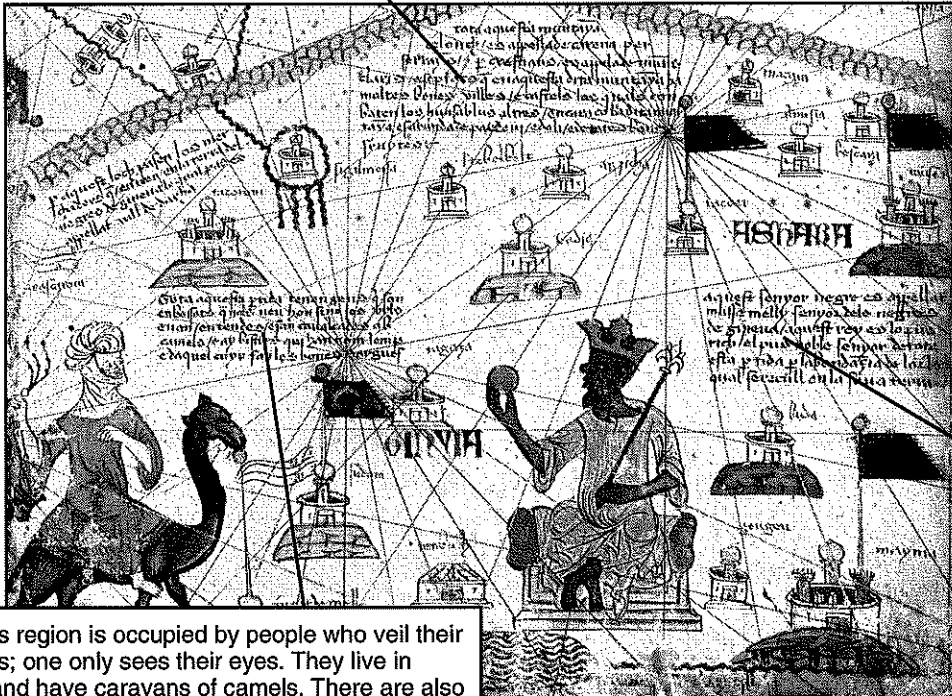
You arrived in Cairo this morning and the city was abuzz with activity and excitement. There are rumors swirling that Mansa Musa will not meet with the local sultan. Meanwhile, great amounts of gold are being given to the people of Cairo. How do you feel about the excitement surrounding your visit? What are your thoughts about how much gold is being distributed? Take a few moments to write your thoughts in your journal.

Document F

Source: The Catalan Atlas, courtesy of the French National Library.

Note: The Catalan Atlas is a medieval map of the known world drawn in 1375 by Abraham Cresques, a Jewish map-maker from Majorca, a Mediterranean island off the coast of Spain. He had never been to West Africa. Rather, he relied on the stories of travelers to make the illustrations and write the captions that appear on the map.

"Through this place pass the merchants who travel to the land of (Mali)."



"All this region is occupied by people who veil their mouths; one only sees their eyes. They live in tents and have caravans of camels. There are also beasts called Lemp from the skins of which they make fine shields."

"This Negro lord is called Musa Mali, lord of all the Negroes of (the region of Mali). So abundant is the gold which is found in his country that he is the richest and most noble king in all the land."

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Writing Journal Entry #6: Label your journal entry "Niani, 1375, Evening."

It has been over 50 years since you began your journey as part of Mansa Musa's historic *hajj*. As you gather some special belongings to pass along to your grandson, you discover the personal journal that you kept during the journey. Reflecting on that time and the recently published and very popular Catalan Atlas that described the *hajj*, you decide to write a final entry. Did the journey turn out the way you hoped? Was it worth the time and money it cost? What was the lasting significance of Mansa Musa's journey? Record your thoughts in your journal.