

◀ The Grande Mosque in Mopti, Mali, was built of bricks and mud.

## The Influence of Islam on West Africa

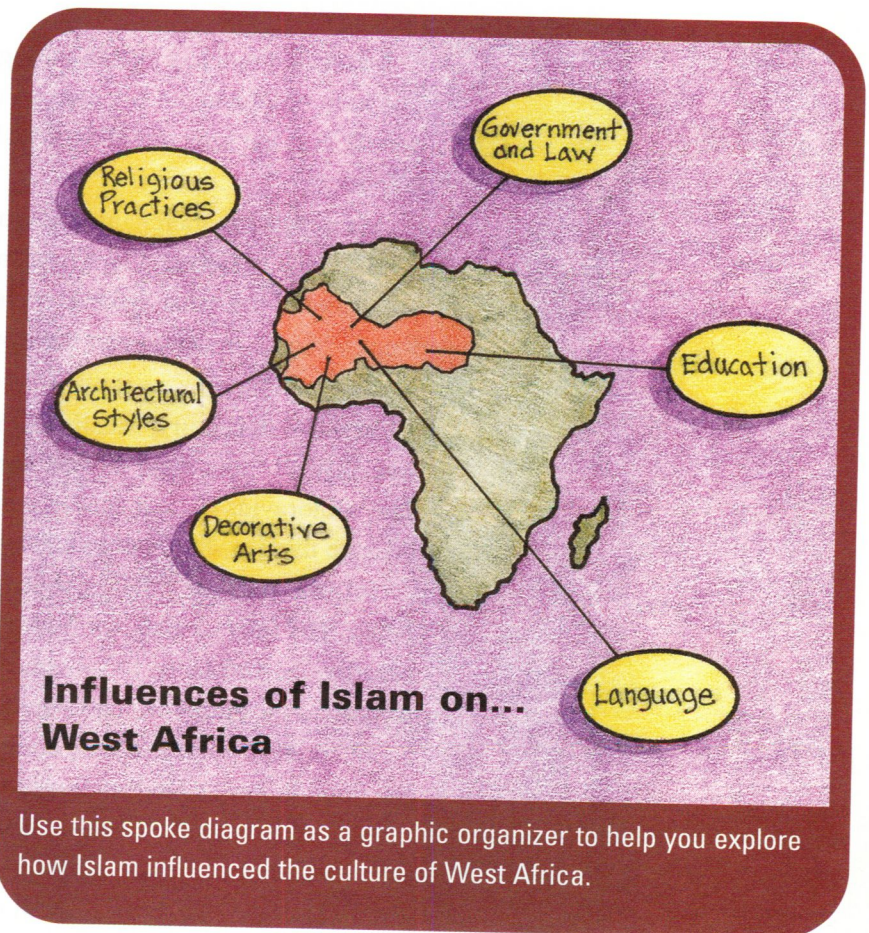
### 14.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you learned about the role of trade in the rise of Ghana and other West African kingdoms. Now you will explore how the Islamic faith influenced West African culture.

During the seventh century, Islam spread quickly through the Middle East and North Africa. In the eighth century, trans-Saharan trade brought Muslim merchants and traders to West Africa. Over the next few hundred years, Islam spread among West Africans. As you will see, both Mali and Songhai eventually accepted Islam. The new faith left a lasting mark on the culture of West Africa.

West Africans often blended Islamic culture with their own traditions. For example, West Africans who became Muslims began praying to God in Arabic. They built mosques as places of worship. Yet they also continued to pray to the spirits of their ancestors, as they had done for centuries.

Islamic beliefs and customs affected many areas of life besides religious faith. In this chapter, you will learn about the spread of Islam in West Africa. Then you will look at Islam's influence on several aspects of West African culture. You'll explore changes in **religious practices, government and law, education, language, architecture, and decorative arts**. You can still see the effects of these changes in West Africa today.





Traders and the missionaries who accompanied them spread Islam to Ghana.

## 14.2 The Spread of Islam in West Africa

Trans-Saharan trade brought Islam to West Africa in the eighth century. At first, Muslim traders and merchants lived side by side with the non-Muslims of West Africa. Over time, however, Islam played a growing role in West African society.

**Traders Bring Islam to Ghana** Between 639 and 708 C.E., Arab Muslims conquered North Africa. Before long, they wanted to bring West Africa into the Islamic world. But sending armies to conquer Ghana was not practical. Ghana was too far away, and it was protected by the Sahara Desert.

Islam first reached Ghana through Muslim traders and missionaries. The king of Ghana did not convert to Islam. Nor did the majority of the people. But the king did allow Muslims to build settlements within his empire.

Many Muslim merchants and traders settled in Kumbi, the great marketplace of Ghana. Over time, a thriving Muslim community developed around the trans-Saharan trade with North Africa. The Muslims in Kumbi had 12 mosques and their own imam (spiritual leader). Scholars studied the Qur'an.

In the 11th century, Muslims from the north called the Almoravids waged jihad (holy war) in West Africa. In 1076, they captured Kumbi. The Almoravids did not stay in power long, but under their rule Islam became more widespread in Ghana.

**Islam in Mali** To the south of Ghana, the Mande also accepted Islam. The tolerance shown by Muslims toward traditional religious practices helped Islam to spread. For example, West Africans continued to pray to the spirits of their ancestors.

In about 1240, the Mande conquered Kumbi. They took control of the trade routes to North Africa and built the empire of Mali.

The early leaders of Mali accepted Islam, but they did not follow all of its teachings. In 1312, a new leader, Mansa Musa, took over in Mali. He became the first West African ruler to practice Islam devoutly.

Under his rule, Mali became a major crossroad of the Islamic world. Muslim merchants, traders, and scholars from Egypt and North Africa came to Mali to do business or to settle.

Like other Muslims, Musa made a hajj, or pilgrimage, to the sacred city of Makkah in Arabia. The hajj was an enormous undertaking. The trip would cover some 3,000 miles. Officials and servants started preparing for the trip months before Musa left. As many as 80,000 people may have accompanied Musa on the hajj.

Musa reached Cairo, Egypt, in July 1324, after eight months of travel. A writer from Cairo described Musa's caravan as "a lavish display of power, wealth, and unprecedented by its size and pageantry." Ahead of Musa arrived 500 slaves, each carrying a six-pound staff of gold. He was followed by a caravan of 200 camels carrying 30,000 pounds of gold along with food, clothing, and supplies.

In Cairo, Musa met the local sultan, or ruler. When he was asked to kneel before the sultan, Musa felt insulted. He was very proud of being the ruler of Mali. After Musa finally agreed to kneel, the sultan invited him to sit beside him as his equal.

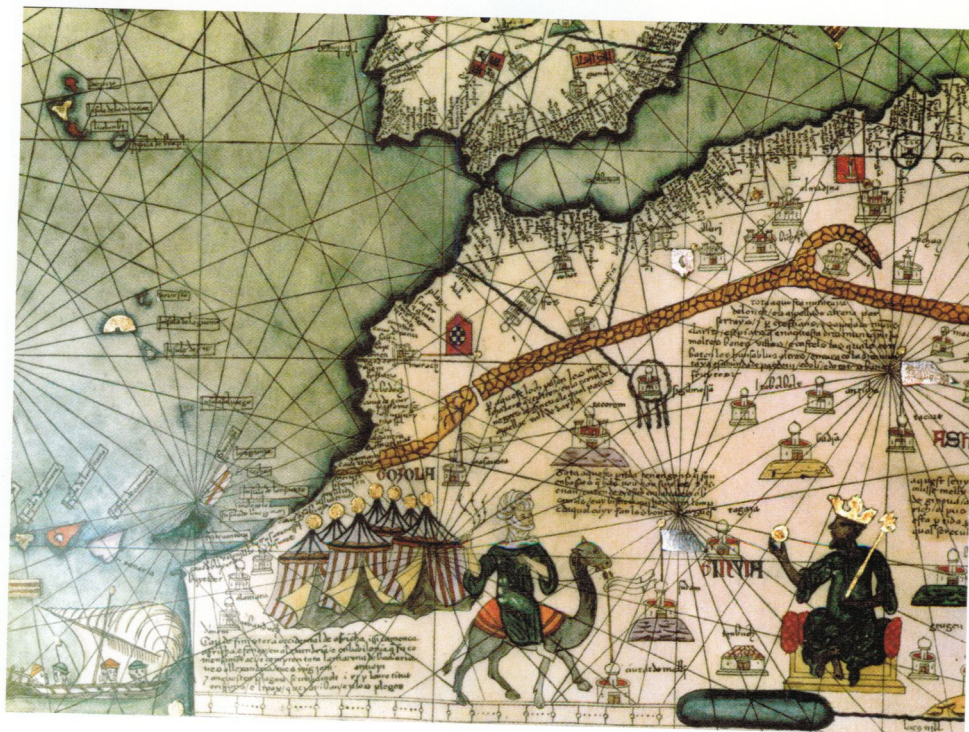
After leaving Cairo, Musa traveled to Arabia to visit Makkah and Madinah. When word spread that the king of Mali was visiting, people lined the streets to see him. Musa's wealth impressed the people and rulers of Arabia. He paid in gold for all the goods and services he received. He also gave expensive gifts to his hosts.

Because of Musa's hajj, Mali gained acceptance as an important empire. By 1375, Mali appeared on a European map of West Africa.

The pilgrimage of Mansa Musa to Makkah was so impressive that European mapmakers produced this map of West Africa with his image prominently displayed.

**Islam in Songhai** One of the groups within Mali's empire was the Songhai people. In the 1460s, the great warrior Sunni Ali became the new ruler of Songhai. He built a powerful army that enabled Songhai to break away from Mali and eventually conquer it.

The early rulers of Songhai did not seriously practice Islam. In the 1490s, Muslims in Songhai rebelled. They placed Askia Mohammed Toure, a devout Muslim, on the throne. Toure set up rigid controls to be sure Islam was practiced properly. He also led a series of wars to convert non-Muslims to Islam. Under his rule, Songhai's empire covered a territory as large as western Europe.



**amulet** a piece of jewelry or other object used as a charm to provide protection against bad luck, illness, injury, or evil

With the introduction of Islam, West Africans began praying five times a day.

## 14.3 New Religious Practices

As Islam spread in West Africa, people adopted new religious practices and ethical values. African Muslims learned Islam's Five Pillars of Faith. They prayed in Arabic, fasted, worshiped in mosques, went on pilgrimages, and gave alms. They were taught to regard all Muslims as part of a single community.

West Africans also began to celebrate Muslim religious festivals. The festival of Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Eid al-Adha commemorates a key event in the story of the prophet Abraham. As a test of faith, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. God spared the boy after Abraham proved his faith by being willing to offer his son to God.

Alongside these new customs, West Africans kept some of their old religious practices. Muslim leaders allowed them to continue religious traditions as long as they did not contradict the Five Pillars of Faith. So, for example, West African Muslims continued to show respect for the spirits of dead ancestors. They kept their belief in spirits who could help those who prayed to them or made sacrifices to them. They used

**amulets**, or charms, that they believed helped people or protected them from harm.

In the last chapter, you read about Ibn Battuta, an Arab who traveled to Mali in the 14th century. Battuta was upset by some local customs. For instance, women, including the daughters of rulers, went unclothed in public. Battuta also saw Muslims throwing dust over their heads when the king approached. These customs upset him because they went against the teachings of Islam.

Yet Battuta was also impressed by the devotion of West Africans to Islam. He wrote, "Anyone who is late at the mosque will find nowhere to pray, the crowd is so great. They zealously learn the Qur'an by heart. Those children who are neglectful in this are put in chains until they have memorized the Qur'an."



## 14.4 New Ideas About Government and Law

Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa developed Islamic forms of government and law. Muslim rulers in West Africa adopted some of these ideas.

One important change concerned the line of **succession**, or inheritance of the right to rule. In West Africa, succession to the throne had traditionally been matrilineal. That is, the right to rule was traced through a woman rather than a man. As you have learned, in Ghana the son of the king's sister inherited the throne.

After the arrival of Islam, succession became **patrilineal**. Under this system, the right to rule passed from father to son.

A second change affected the structure of government. Muslims believed in a highly centralized government. After West African kings converted to Islam, they started to exercise more control of local rulers. Rulers also adopted titles used in Muslim lands. Often the head of a region was now called the *sultan* or the *amir* or *emir*. Amir and emir are shortened forms of Amir al-Muminin. This Arabic expression means "Commander of the Faithful."

A third major change was the adoption of shari'ah (Islamic law). In many towns and cities, shari'ah replaced traditional customary law. The customary law of West Africa was very different from shari'ah. Laws were not written, but everyone knew what they were and accepted them. A chief or king usually enforced customary law but did not give physical punishments. Instead, the guilty party paid the injured party with gifts or services. The family or clan of the guilty person could also be punished.

One example of customary law was "trial by wood." Suppose a man was accused of not paying debts or of injuring another person. The accused man was forced to drink water that had been poured over sour, bitter wood. If the man vomited, he was believed to be innocent.

Unlike customary law, shari'ah is written law. Muslims believed that shari'ah came from God. As you learned in Unit 2, shari'ah was administered by judges called *qadis*. The *qadis* heard cases in a court. They listened to witnesses and ruled on the basis of the law and the evidence presented to them.



With the coming of Islam, the power of the ruler became greater and local chiefs grew less important.

**succession** inheritance of the right to rule  
**patrilineal** based on a man's family line

## 14.5 A New Emphasis on Education

Muslims greatly value learning. In West Africa, Muslims encouraged people to become educated. They built many schools and centers of learning.

One key center was the trading city of Timbuktu, on the Niger River. Under Mali and Songhai rule, Timbuktu became famous for its community of Islamic scholars. It remained an important center of learning until Songhai was conquered by Morocco in the late 1500s.

Several universities were built in Timbuktu. The most famous was the University of Sankore. It became one of the world's great universities.

Sankore was made up of several small, independent schools. Each school was run by an imam, or scholar. The imams at Sankore were respected throughout the Islamic world.

Students at Sankore studied under a single imam. The basic course of learning included the Qur'an, Islamic studies, law, and literature. After mastering these subjects, students could go on to study a particular field. Many kinds of courses were available. Students could learn medicine and surgery. They could study astronomy, mathematics, physics, or chemistry. Or they could take up philosophy, geography, art, or history.

The highest degree at Sankore required about 10 years of study. During graduation, students wore a cloth headdress called a *turban*. The turban was a symbol of divine light, wisdom, knowledge, and excellent moral character.

When travelers and traders passed through Timbuktu, they were encouraged to study at one of the universities. Trade associations also set up their own colleges. Students in these colleges learned about the profession of trading in addition to Islam.

Muslims also set up schools to educate children in the Qur'an. Timbuktu had 150 or more Qur'anic schools where children learned to read and interpret Islam's holy book.

With their love of education, Muslims treasured books. Muslims did not have printing presses, so books had to be copied by hand. Mosques and universities in West Africa built up large libraries of these precious volumes. Some individuals also created sizable collections. One Islamic scholar's private library contained 700 volumes. Many of his books were among the rarest in the world.



The influence of Muslims, who greatly value education, made the city of Timbuktu a center for learning. Several universities were established there.

## 14.6 A New Language

In Unit 2, you learned that Islam is rooted in Arabic culture. As Islam spread, so did the Arabic language.

In West Africa, Arabic became the language of religion, learning, commerce, and government. West Africans continued to use their native languages in everyday speech.

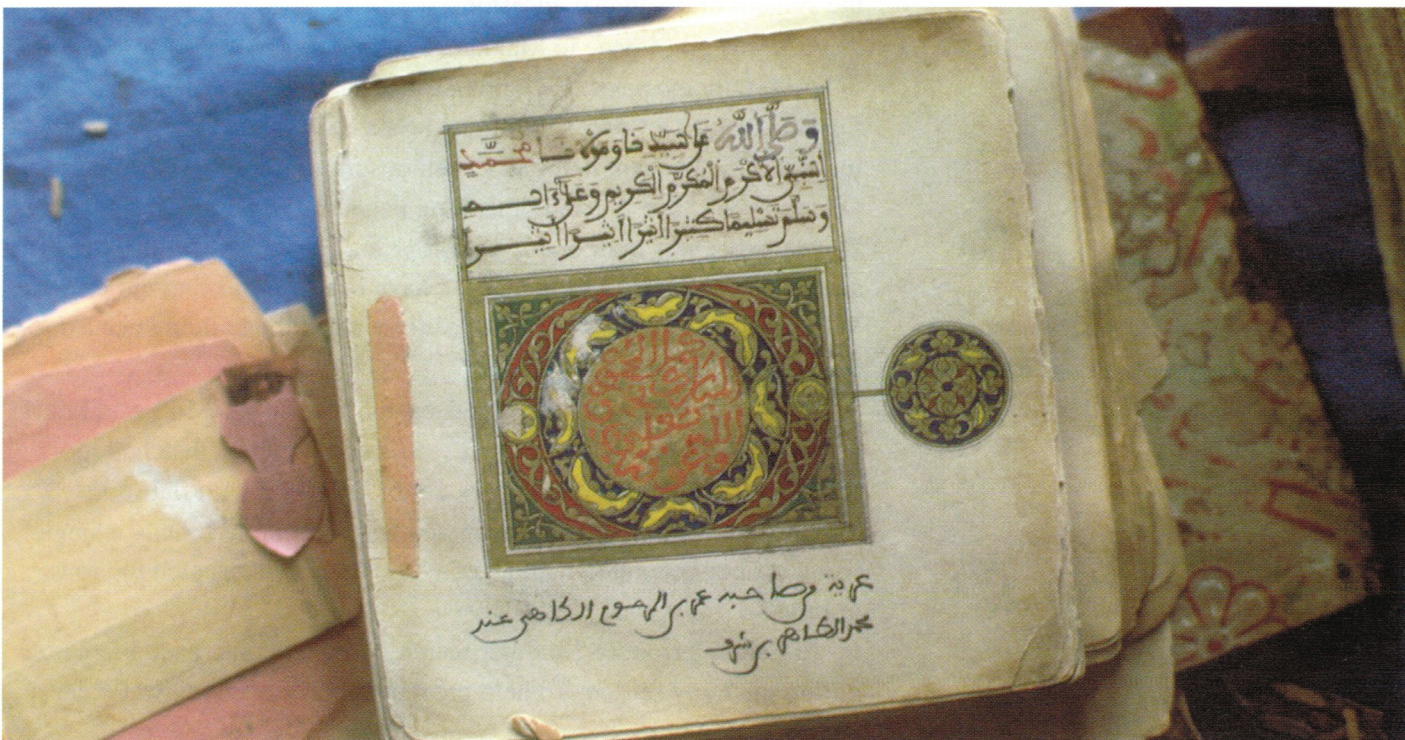
For Muslims, Arabic was the language of religion. The Qur'an, of course, was written in Arabic. All Muslims were expected to read the Qur'an and memorize parts of it. As West Africans converted to Islam, more and more of them learned Arabic.

Arabic also became the language of learning. The scholars who came to West Africa were mainly Arabic-speaking Muslims. Some of their students became scholars themselves. Like their teachers, they wrote in Arabic.

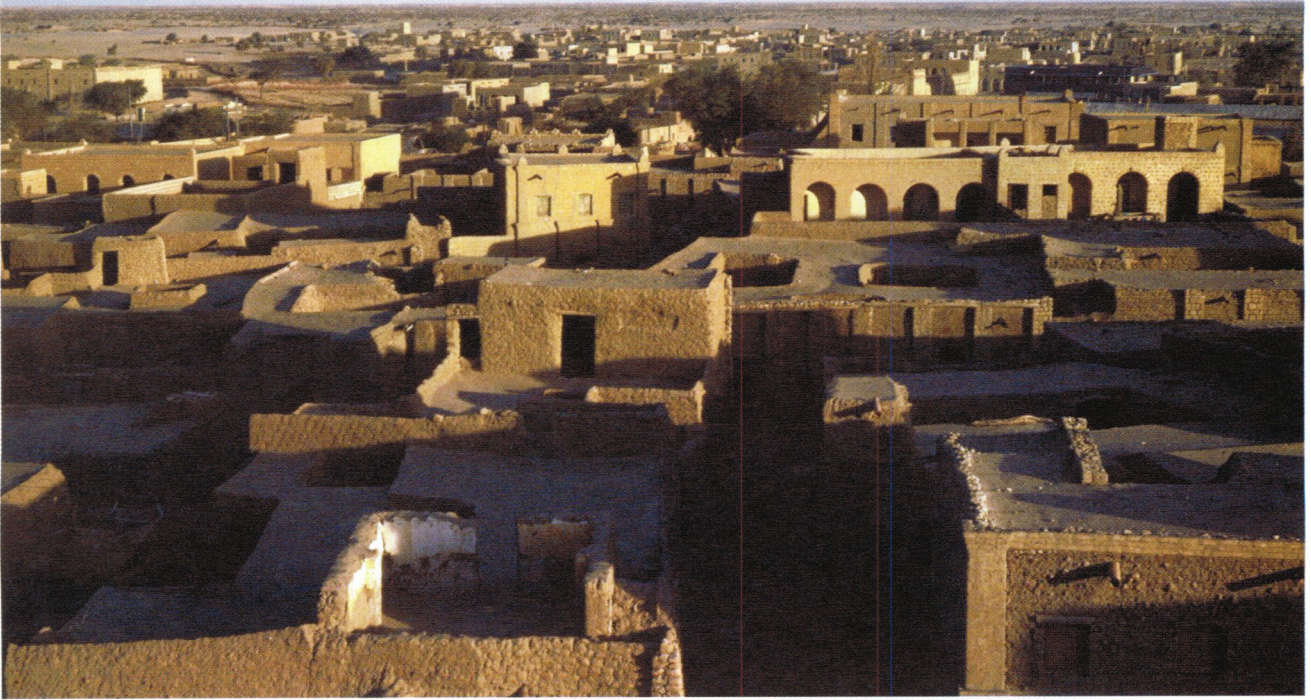
Scholars used Arabic to write about the history and culture of West Africa. They wrote about a wide variety of topics. They described how people used animals, plants, and minerals to cure diseases. They discussed ethical behavior for business and government. They told how to use the stars to determine the seasons. They recorded the history of Songhai. They also wrote about Islamic law. These writings are an invaluable source of knowledge about West Africa.

Finally, Arabic became the language of trade and government. Arabic allowed West African traders who spoke different languages to communicate more easily. Arabic also allowed rulers to keep records and to write to rulers in other countries.

Arabic, the language in which the Qur'an is written, became the language of learning, government, and trade.







Islamic architects built flat-roofed houses made of sun-dried bricks.

## 14.7 New Architectural Styles

The influence of Islam brought new styles of architecture to West Africa. People designed mosques for worship. They also created a new design for homes.

Traditionally, West Africans had built small shrines to the forces of nature. As they converted to Islam, they began to build mosques. The materials that were most available in the savanna were mud and wood. Using these materials, West Africans built mosques that blended Islamic architectural styles with their own traditional religious art. For example, the minaret (tower) of one mosque was designed to look like the symbol of a Songhai ancestor.

After his pilgrimage to Makkah, the Mali ruler Mansa Musa wanted to build more mosques. He convinced al-Saheli, an architect from Spain, to return to Mali with him. Al-Saheli built several structures in Mali. One of them is the most famous mosque in West Africa, Djingareyber. (See the photograph on page 154.) Located in Timbuktu, Djingareyber was built out of limestone and earth mixed with straw and wood. The walls of the mosque have beams projecting out of them. Workers used the beams as **scaffolding** when the building needed to be repaired.

**scaffolding** a framework used to support workers and materials during the construction or repair of a building

Al-Saheli also introduced a new design for houses. Most traditional houses in West Africa were round with a cone-shaped, thatched roof. Al-Saheli built rectangular houses out of brick and with flat roofs. The outside walls were very plain and had no windows. Only a single wooden door decorated with a geometric design interrupted the rows of bricks.

Al-Saheli introduced another feature to houses that made life easier during the rainy season. To help prevent damage from rainwater, he built clay drain pipes.

## 14.8 New Styles in Decorative Arts

In Unit 2, you learned how Muslims used calligraphy (artistic writing) and geometric patterns in their decorative arts. West Africans adopted these designs for their own art and **textiles**.

Muslims used calligraphy to decorate objects with words or verses from the Qur'an. West Africans adopted this practice. They began using the Arabic word for God to decorate costumes, fans, and even weapons. They also wrote verses from the Qur'an in amulets.

Geometric patterns were an important element in Islamic art. Recall that Muslims used these patterns rather than drawing pictures of animals or people. Geometric designs were popular in traditional West African art as well. West Africans used them to decorate textiles for clothing and everyday objects such as stools and ceramic containers. The arrival of Islam reinforced this practice.

Muslims also influenced the way people dressed in West Africa. Arab Muslims commonly wore an Arabic robe as an outer layer of clothing. An Arabic robe has wide, long sleeves and a long skirt. Muslims used writing to identify and decorate their robes. West Africans adopted the Arabic robe. Like Arabs, they still wear it today.



Islam reinforced the West African tradition of using geometric designs in decorations.

## 14.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about the influence of Islam in West Africa. Islam left a deep mark on West African culture.

Traders and missionaries first brought Islam to Ghana in the eighth century. The influence of Islam grew under the rulers of Mali and Songhai.

Islam affected many areas of life in West Africa. It changed how people practiced religion. It brought new ideas about government and law. The royal succession became patrilineal. Government became more centralized. Shari'ah replaced customary law.

The Islamic love of learning brought a new emphasis on education to West Africa. People studied in Qur'anic schools and at Islamic universities. Timbuktu became a center of Islamic and academic study.

With the spread of Islam, Arabic became the language of religion, learning, commerce, and government. New styles of architecture developed as West Africans built mosques and changed the designs of their homes. They also adopted new styles in their decorative arts.

Traditional West African culture did not disappear with the arrival of Islam. In the next chapter, you will learn more about the cultural legacy of West Africa.

**textile** a woven cloth

