Influence of Trans-Saharan Trade on West Africa

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE: Describe the role of the trans-Saharan caravan trade in the changing religious and cultural characteristics of West Africa and the influence of Islamic beliefs, ethics, and law.

Read the chart to answer questions on the next page.

Impact of Trans-Saharan Trade

Berber nomads from North Africa established trade routes with West Africans. In addition to the goods they traded, they also spread Islamic ideas that influenced aspects of West African societies.

Religion
- Some rulers and members of the upper classes converted to Islam. Several rulers practiced their traditional religion as well. This helped them keep their authority over their people.
- In the empire of Mali, devout Muslim rulers helped spread Islam further. Mansa Musa, ruler of Mali from 1312 to 1322, made an elaborate hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca.
- The majority of common people followed their traditional animistic beliefs. Animism is a belief in spirits living in animals, plants, and natural forces.
- Over the centuries, more West Africans adapted Islamic practices. They developed their own type of Islam.

Culture
- Islam influenced styles of architecture in West Africa. Muslim rulers oversaw the construction of many mosques in this part of Africa. These mosques often combined Islamic and West African features. For example, they had minarets, or tall towers, but they were built of mud brick.
- Berbers introduced new weaving techniques and the horizontal loom.
- Islamic geometric design expanded the West Africans’ use of these patterns.
- Other aspects of Muslim culture were adapted to local customs or, as in the case of women veiling their faces, were ignored completely in West African Muslim communities.

Ethics and Law
- Islamic ideas about law and right and wrong influenced West African societies. This was a result of the large number of Muslims who had positions of authority in the government.
- In many cases, a compromise between Muslim and traditional law or ethics was established. In other cases, local tradition was followed.
- Later West African rulers included more Islamic features in their governments. The Songhai emperor Askia Muhammad appointed Muslim judges, bringing the legal system further in line with Islamic principles. He created a large bureaucracy staffed by Arab Muslims.
DIRECTIONS: Choose the letter of the best answer.

1. Why were the Berbers significant in the history of West Africa?
   A. They built great cities.
   B. They established trade routes and spread Islam.
   C. They mined the gold that was traded for salt.
   D. They conquered Ghana and Mali.

2. How might the influence of Islam upon the religious practices of West Africa be summarized?
   A. Islam was adopted eagerly by all.
   B. Some adopted Islam, while others kept traditional beliefs.
   C. With time, fewer West Africans practiced Islam.
   D. More West Africans believed in animism once Islam was introduced.

3. What did Muslim and West African artists have in common?
   A. They portrayed the human form realistically.
   B. They decorated everything with calligraphy.
   C. They used geometric designs in their art.
   D. They both depicted their gods in sculptures.

When Ibn Battuta arrived there, the casual interaction between men and women shocked him. Ibn Battuta expressed his disapproval and then promptly left the house.

4. In the passage, what is revealed by the scene Ibn Battuta witnesses and by his reaction?
   A. West Africans followed the Muslim practice of keeping women and men separate.
   B. West African Muslims did not follow all Islamic customs.
   C. Ibn Battuta enjoyed the freedom of society in Mali.
   D. There were no devout Muslims in Mali.

5. How did government in West Africa change after the introduction of Islam?
   A. The influence of the Qur’an on West African laws increased.
   B. There was no change in West African government.
   C. The emperor was replaced by a caliph who built a Muslim empire.
   D. The government lost control of the gold-salt trade.