The Kaaba, Islam’s most holy place, is the shrine in Mecca that Muslims are required to visit at least once in their lifetimes. Worshippers circle the Kaaba seven times in a counterclockwise direction in an act called the tawaf. They then walk between two sacred hills seven times. Completing these two acts completes the umrah, or basic hajj. (1)

Muslims believe that Muhammad continued receiving messages from God for the rest of his life. These messages were collected in the Qur’an (kuh - RAN), the holy book of Islam. (2)

Muhammad was born into an important family in the city of Mecca around 570. As a child, he traveled with his uncle’s caravan. Once he was grown, he managed a caravan business owned by a wealthy woman named Khadijah (ka-DEE-jah). At age 25, Muhammad married Khadijah. (3)

When Muhammad was about 40 he went into a cave to meditate. According to religious writings, an angel spoke to Muhammad, telling him to “Recite! Recite!” Muhammad asked what he should recite. The angel answered: “Recite in the name of your lord who created, created man from clots of blood! Recite! Your lord is the Most Bountiful One, Who by the pen taught man what he did not know.” (4)

The messages Muhammad received form the basis of the religion called Islam. In Arabic, Islam means “to submit to god.” (5)

A follower of Islam is called a Muslim. (6)

Muhammad’s teachings were new to Arabs, most of whom were polytheistic. They had many shrines, or sacred places, where they worshipped their gods. A very important shrine, the Kaaba, was in Mecca. People traveled there every year on a pilgrimage, a journey to a scared place. (7)

Mecca’s wealthy merchants didn’t like Muhammad’s teachings; because he taught that all who believed in Allah would become part of a community in which rich and poor were equal. They threatened Muhammad and even planned to kill him. So in 622, Muhammad and many followers went to Medina. Medina means “the Prophet’s city” in Arabic. (8)
The central teaching in the Qur’an is that there is only one God – Allah – and that Muhammad is the prophet. (9)

Muslims must wash themselves before praying so they will be pure before Allah. The Qur’an also tells Muslims what they should eat and drink. Muslims are not allowed to eat pork or drink alcohol. (10)

Another important subject in the Qur’an has to do with jihad (ji-HAHD), which means “to make an effort, or to struggle.” Jihad refers to the inner struggle people go through in their effort to obey God and behave according to Islamic ways. Jihad can also mean the struggle to defend the Muslim community, or, historically, to convert people to Islam. The word has also been translated as “holy war” (11)

The Qur’an is not the only source of Islamic teachings. Muslims also study the hadith (huh-DEETH), the written record of Muhammad’s words and actions. (12)

The Sunnah (SOON-nuh) refers to the way Muhammad lived, which provides a model for the duties and the way of life expected of Muslims. The Sunnah guides Muslim’s behavior. (13)

The first duties of a Muslim are known as the Five Pillars of Islam, which are five acts of worship required of all Muslims. The five pillars are 1 - Saying “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet”. 2 - Praying five times a day. 3 - Giving to the poor and needy. 4 - Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. 5 - Traveling to Mecca at least once on a hajj. (14)

After Muhammad’s death his followers quickly chose Abu Bakr (UH-boo BAK-uhr), one of Muhammad’s first converts, to be the next leader of Islam. He was the first caliph (KAY-luhf), a title that Muslims use for the highest leader of Islam. (15)

In the mid-600’s, Islam split into two groups. The two groups were the Shia (SHEE-ah) and the Sunni (soo-nee). The Shia were Muslims who thought that only Muhammad’s descendants could become caliphs. The Sunni didn’t think caliphs had to be related to Muhammad. (16)

Muslim mathematicians combined Indian and Greek ideas with their own to dramatically increase human knowledge of mathematics. The fact that we call our numbers today “Arabic numerals” is a reminder of this contribution. (17)
The Blue Mosque in Istanbul was built in the early 1600’s for an Ottoman sultan. It upset many people at the time it was built because they thought its six minarets – instead of the usual four – were an attempt to make it as great as the mosque in Mecca. A minaret is a narrow tower from where Muslims are called to prayer. (18)

The Islamic religion currently has 1.6 billion followers. (19)

Among the earliest people in West Africa were the Soninke (soh-NING-kee). They lived in small groups and farmed the land along the Niger River. After 300 AD, the Soninke began to band together for protection against nomadic herders who wanted to move into the area. The banding together was the beginning of Ghana. (20)

The empire of Ghana lay between the Sahara desert and deep forests. In this position people were in a good position to trade the region’s two main resources – gold and salt. (21)

Silent barter was a popular process for traders in Ghana. Silent barter is a process in which people exchange goods without contacting each other directly. Salt traders left slabs of salt along the river bank. In exchange, gold miners left what they thought was a fair amount of gold. (22)

The empire of Ghana reached its peak under Tunka Manin (TOOHN-kah MAH –nin). This king had a lavish court where he displayed the wealth of the empire. (23)

By the early 1200’s, the empire of Ghana had collapsed. Three major factors contributed to its end. 1 – A group from North Africa called the Almoravids attacked Ghana in the 1060’s. 2 – The Almoravids brought herds of animals with them. These animals ate all of the grass in the pastures. 3 – About 1200 the people of a country that Ghana had conquered rose up in a rebellion. (24)

Mali was located along the upper Niger River. This area’s fertile soil helped Mali grow. Mali’s location on the Niger also allowed its people to control trade on the river. (25)

According to legend, Mali’s rise to power began under a ruler named Sundiata. By the 1230’s Sundiata had conquered Ghana and most of West Africa. (26)
Mali’s most famous ruler was a Muslim named Mansa Musa (MAHN-sah moo-SAH). Under his skillful leadership, Mali reached the height of its wealth, power, and fame in the 1300’s. (27)

Because of Mansa Musa’s influence, Islam spread through a large part of West Africa, gaining many new believers. Mansa Musa ruled Mali for about 25 years (1312 – 1337). During that time, added an important trade city called Timbuktu. (28)

Religion was very important to Mansa Musa. In 1324 he left Mali on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Through his journey, Mansa Musa introduced his empire to the Islamic world. (29)

When Mansa Musa died, his son Maghan (MAH-gan) took the thrown. Maghan was a weak ruler. Eventually the people of Songhai rebelled and gained control of the region. (30)

In 1464, Sunni Ali became the ruler of Songhai. During Sunni Ali’s reign, Songhai built an empire. (31)

Sunni Ali died in 1492 and his son, Sunni Baru, took the thrown. Sunnia Baru was not Muslim and the people of Songhai feared that they would lose their trade with Muslim lands. Muhammad Ture led a rebellion and eventually overthrew Sunni Baru. (32)

Muhammad Ture chose the title of askia, a title of high military rank. Eventually, he became known as Askia the Great. (33)

Askia supported education and learning. Under his rule Timbuktu thrived, drawing thousands of people to its universities, schools, libraries, and mosques. The city was especially known for the University of Sankore. (34)