“Mali is the cultural heir to the succession of ancient African empires--Ghana, Mali, and Songhai--that occupied the West African savannah. These empires controlled Saharan trade and were in touch with Mediterranean and Middle Eastern centers of civilization. The Ghana Empire, dominated by the Soninke or Saracolé people and centered in the area along the Malian-Mauritanian frontier, was a powerful trading state from about A.D. 700 to 1075. The Malinke Kingdom of Mali had its origins on the upper Niger River in the 11th century. Expanding rapidly in the 13th century under the leadership of Soudiata Keita, it reached its height about 1325, when it conquered Timbuktu and Gao. Thereafter, the kingdom began to decline, and by the 15th century, it controlled only a small fraction of its former domain. The Songhai Empire expanded its power from its center in Gao during the period 1465-1530. At its peak under Askia Mohammad I, it encompassed the Hausa states as far as Kano (in present-day Nigeria) and much of the territory that had belonged to the Mali Empire in the west. It was destroyed by a Moroccan invasion in 1591. Timbuktu was a center of commerce and of the Islamic faith throughout this period, and priceless manuscripts from this epoch are still preserved there. The United States and other donors are making efforts to help preserve these priceless manuscripts as part of Mali’s cultural heritage.

The western region of Mali was a part of the empires of Ghana and Mali. Ghana existed from about A.D. 700 to 1075, and Mali was founded in the 11th century. In 1591, Timbuktu was destroyed by a Moroccan invasion. The Songhai Empire, which controlled much of the region in the 13th to 15th centuries, was destroyed by a Moroccan invasion in 1591. Timbuktu, which was a center of commerce and of the Islamic faith throughout this period, is still home to priceless manuscripts that are being preserved by donors such as the United States.

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