

~~Unit Activities, cont'd.~~

China's demand for silver remained at the center of the world economic system until about 1750. Finally, tens of thousands of tons of silver glutted China's market. The value of silver fell, and China's economy was rocked by inflation. Fluctuating values of silver caused the real salaries of Chinese officials to rise and fall, encouraging graft and corruption. For Spain, the declining value of silver meant disaster. So much so that the Spanish crown actually experienced bankruptcies during times of record silver production. But, just as the Pacific economy stumbled, the Atlantic economy picked up because of profits from the circular movements of slaves, sugar, tobacco, and gold. Europeans weaned themselves from deficit trading of silver, and eventually the balance of economic power shifted in their favor. One uniquely significant commodity was also traded between West Africans and Europeans, beginning in the sixteenth century: human beings. The presence of Europeans along African coasts ultimately led to the forced migrations of twelve million Africans. Trade in slaves to work the silver mines and plantations of the New World reached its peak during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, European traders carried Japanese silks to West Africa on their return voyages from Asia. African merchants then sold them to local weavers, who unraveled the silks and rewove the threads into traditional patterns like the kente cloth of the Gold Coast of West Africa. The Portuguese found themselves needing to rely on local communities in order to establish trade. They established "El Mina" ("The Mine") in the fifteenth century, which became a permanent base for Portuguese trading expeditions into the African interior and across the Atlantic Ocean. Once El Mina was established, it became a magnet of opportunity; it attracted trade from the interior; it reoriented the trade routes; and it brought goods south to the coast instead of north. Many societies declined in the African interior because of the growth of opportunity on the coast.

Activity 2: Early Maritime Encounters in West Africa— 45 minutes

- Compare the local Sapi salt cellar design with its adaptation for the European luxury market.
- Write a note from the Medici family presenting the ivory salt cellar in the picture to a pope in 1500. (The Portuguese arrived on the Sierra Leone coast, where the Sapi ivory artisans lived, in 1460).



Item #5466. Barbara Blackmun, IVORY SALT CELLAR (sixteenth century). Courtesy of Barbara Blackmun.



Item #2681. Benvenuto Cellini, SALT CELLAR OF FRANCIS I (1543). Courtesy of World Art Kiosk.