

Ch. 1 Section 3: Trading Kingdoms of West Africa

West Africa's Great Kingdoms

For hundreds of years, trade crisscrossed West Africa. For most of that time, West Africans did not profit much from the Saharan trade because the routes were run by **berbers**, a group of people from northern Africa. Eventually, that situation changed. A succession of three great kingdoms came to power as their people, gained control of valuable trade routes in West Africa. **Ghana** was the first of these empires, followed by the kingdoms of **Mali** and **Songhai**.

Kingdom of Ghana

Historians think the first people in Ghana were farmers along the **Niger River**. Sometime after AD 300 these farmers, the **Soninké**, were threatened by nomadic herders. The herders wanted to take the farmers' water and pastures. For protection groups of Soninke families began to band together. This banding together was the beginning of Ghana.

Ghana was in an ideal position to become a trading center. To the north lay the vast Sahara, the source of much of the **salt**. Ghana itself was rich in **gold**. People wanted gold for its beauty, but they needed salt in their diets to survive. Salt, which could be used to preserve food, also made bland food tasty. These qualities made salt very valuable. In fact, Africans sometimes cut up slabs of salt and used the pieces as money. As trade in gold and salt increased, Ghana's rulers gained power. Eventually, they built up armies equipped with iron weapons that were superior to the weapons of nearby people. Over time, Ghana took control of trade from merchants. Merchants from the north and south then met to exchange goods in Ghana. By 800 Ghana was firmly in control of West Africa's trade routes. Nearly all trade between northern and southern Africa passed through Ghana. With so many trespassing through their lands, Ghana's rulers looked for ways to make money from them. One way they raised money was by forcing traders to pay **taxes**. Every trader who entered Ghana had to pay a special tax on the goods he carried. Then he had to pay another tax on any goods he took with him when he left. Ghana's rulers gained incredible wealth from trade, taxes on traders and on the people of Ghana, and their own personal stores of gold. They used their wealth to build an army and an empire.

Islam in Ghana

Extensive trade routes brought the people of Ghana into contact with people of many different cultures and beliefs. As the kingdom of Ghana extended into the Sahara, increased contact with Arab traders from the east brought the religion of **Islam** to Ghana. **Islam** was founded in the 600s by an Arab named **Muhammad**. **Muslims**, followers of Islam, believe that God had spoken to Muhammad through an angel and had made him a **prophet**, someone who tells of God's messages. After Muhammad's death, his followers wrote down his teachings to form the book known as the **Qur'an**. Islam spread quickly through the Arabian Peninsula. In the 1060s, a Muslim group called the **Almoravids** attacked Ghana in an effort to force its leaders to convert to Islam. The Almoravids weakened Ghana's empire and cut off many trade routes. Without its trade, Ghana could not support its empire, and the empire eventually fell. The influence of

Islam, however, remained strong. By the late 1400s Islam would become the most practiced religion in the region.

Kingdom of Mali

Like Ghana, **Mali** lay along the upper Niger River. This area's fertile soil helped Mali grow. In addition, Mali's location on the Niger allowed its people to control trade on the river. Through this control of trade, the empire grew rich and powerful. According to legend, Mali's rise to power began under a ruler named **Sundiata**. **Sundiata** won back his country's independence and conquered nearby kingdoms, including Ghana. Mali's most famous ruler, however, was a Muslim king named **Mansa Musa**. Under his leadership, Mali reached the height of its wealth, power, and fame.

Mansa Musa ruled Mali for about 25 years, from 1312 to 1337. During that time, Mali added many important trade centers including **Timbuktu**, Djenne, and Gao, to its empire. Traders came to Timbuktu from the north and the south to trade for salt, gold, shells, and many other goods. Religion was also very important to Mansa Musa. In 1324 he left Mali on a **hajj**, or pilgrimage to **Mecca**. Making this journey one in their lives is the spiritual duty of all Muslims. As he traveled to Mecca, Mansa Musa introduced his empire to the world. The stories of Mali's wealth and religion spread far and wide. Because of Mansa Musa's influence, Islam spread through a large part of West Africa.

Mansa Musa wanted all Muslims to be able to read the Qur'an. Therefore, he stressed the importance of learning to read and write the Arabic language. He sent scholars to study in Morocco. These scholars later set up schools in Mali for studying the Qur'an.

To encourage the spread of Islam in West Africa, Mansa Musa brought back artists and architects from other Muslim countries to build **mosques**, or buildings for Muslim prayer, throughout his lands.

The architectural advances in cities like Timbuktu as well as an organized government, an emphasis on education, and expansion of trade all combined to make Mansa Musa Mali's most successful ruler. Much of Mali's success depended on strong leaders. After Mansa Musa died, poor leadership weakened the empire. By 1500 nearly all of the lands the kingdom once ruled were lost. Only a small area of Mali remained.

Songhai Empire

In the 1300s Mansa Musa had conquered a rival kingdom of people called the **Songhai**, who also lived along the Niger River. As the Mali Empire weakened in the 1400s, the Songhai grew in strength. They took advantage of Mali's decline, regained their independence, and eventually conquered most of Mali.

One of Songhai's greatest rulers was **Muhammad Ture**, who chose the title **Askia the Great**. Like Mansa Musa, Askia the Great was a devout Muslim who supported education and learning. Under his rule, the cities of Gao and Timbuktu flourished. They contained great mosques, universities, schools, and libraries. People came from all parts of West Africa to study mathematics, science, medicine, grammar, and law.

Askia understood that an empire needed effective government. He created a professional army, and to improve the government, he set up five provinces within Songhai. He removed local

leaders and appointed new governors who were loyal to him. He also created specialized departments to oversee various tasks, much like modern day government offices do. Soon after Askia the Great lost power, the empire of Songhai declined. Songhai was invaded by the **Moroccans**, the kingdom's northern neighbors. The Moroccans wanted to control the Saharan salt mines. They had superior military power and were able to take over Timbuktu and Gao. Changes in trade patterns completed Songhai's fall.

West African Slave Trade

The practice of slavery had existed in Africa and in many parts of the world for centuries. Traditionally, slavery in West Africa mostly involved only black Africans, who were both slaveholders and slaves. This changed in the 600s when Arab Muslims, and later Europeans, became slave traders. Though Europeans had long traded resources with Africa, they became more interested in the growing slave trade.

People who were captured by warring groups during battle could be sold into slavery. In addition, criminals were sometimes sold as slaves. Other enslaved people were captured during raids on villages, and sometimes even the relatives of people who owed money were sold into slavery as payment for debts. Enslaved Africans were often bought to form menial labor and domestic chores. In some cultures, having slaves raised the status of the slaveholder. The market for West African Slaves increased as Muslim traders bought or seized black Africans to sell in North Africa. West Africa was also home to many enslaved Africans brought to the Americas. Over time, the slave trade became even more important to the West African economy. Kings traded slaves for valuable goods, such as horses from the Middle East and textiles and weapons from Europe. The **trans-Saharan** slave trade contributed to the power of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.