



THE SUDAN: SONGHAY, KANEM-BORNU, AND HAUSALAND

The kingdom of Songhay, a successor state of Ghana and Mali, dominated the whole Niger region of the western and central Sudan (see Map 20.1). Muhammad Toure (1492–1528) completed the expansionist and administrative consolidation begun by his predecessors. Muhammad Toure's power rested on his successful military expeditions. From his capital at Gao, he extended his lordship as far north as the salt-mining center at Taghaz in the western Sahara and as far east as Agada and Kano. A convert to Islam, Muhammad made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Impressed by what he saw there, he tried to bring about greater centralization in his own territories. In addition to building a strong army and improving taxation procedures, he replaced local Songhay officials with more efficient Arab ones in an effort to substitute royal institutions for ancient kinship ties.

What kind of economy existed in the Songhay Empire? What social structures? What role did women play in Songhay society? What is known of Songhay education and culture? The paucity of written records and of surviving artifacts prevents scholars from satisfactorily exploring these questions. Some information is provided by Leo Africanus (ca 1465–1550), a Moroccan captured by pirates and given as a slave to Pope Leo X. Leo Africanus became a Christian, taught Arabic in Rome, and in 1526 published an account of his many travels, including a stay in the Songhay kingdom.

As a scholar, Leo was naturally impressed by Timbuktu, the second city of the empire, which he visited in 1513. "Here [is] a great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the King's court," Leo reported.¹⁰ Many of these Islamic scholars had studied in Cairo and other centers of Muslim learning. They gave Timbuktu a reputation for intellectual sophistication, religious piety, and moral justice.

Songhay under Muhammad Toure seems to have enjoyed economic prosperity. Leo Africanus noted the abundant food supply, which was produced in the southern Savanna and carried to Timbuktu by a large fleet of canoes controlled by the king. The Sudanese had large amounts of money to spend, and expensive North African and European luxuries were much in demand: clothes, copperware, glass and stone beads, perfumes, and horses. The existence of many shops and markets implies the development of an urban culture. At Timbuktu merchants, scholars, judges, and artisans constituted a distinctive bourgeoisie. The presence of many foreign merchants, including Jews and Italians, gave the city a cosmopolitan atmosphere. Jews largely controlled the working of gold.

Slaves played a very important part in the economy of Songhay. On the royal farms scattered throughout the kingdom, slaves produced rice—the staple crop—for the royal granaries. Although slaves could possess their own slaves, land, and cattle, they could not bequeath any of this property; the king inherited all of it. Muhammad Toure greatly increased the number of royal slaves through raids on the pagans (non-Muslims). He gave slaves to favorite Muslim scholars, who thus gained a steady source of income. Or the slaves were sold at the large market at Gao. Traders from North Africa bought them for sale in Cairo, Constantinople, Lisbon, Naples, Genoa, and Venice.

The kingdom of Songhay had considerable economic and cultural strengths, but it also had serious internal problems. Islamic institutions never took root in the countryside, and Muslim officials alienated the king

from his people. Muhammad Toure's reforms were a failure. He governed a diverse group of peoples—Twareg, Malinke, Fulani, as well as Songhay—who were often hostile to one another, and no cohesive element united them. Finally, the Songhay never developed an effective method of transferring power. Revolts, conspiracies, and palace intrigues followed the deaths of every king, and only three of the nine rulers in the dynasty begun by Muhammad Toure died natural deaths. Muhammad himself was murdered by one of his sons. His death began a period of political instability that led to the slow disintegration of the kingdom.¹¹

In 1582 the sultanate of Morocco began to press southward in search of a greater share of the trans-Saharan trade. The people of Songhay, lacking effective leadership and believing the desert to be a sure protection against invasion, took no defensive precautions. In 1591 a Moroccan army of three thousand soldiers—many of whom were slaves of European origin equipped with European muskets—crossed the Sahara and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Songhay at Tondibi. This battle spelled the end of the Songhay Empire. Although a moderate-size kingdom lingered on in the south for a century or so and weak political units arose, not until the eighteenth century did kingdoms able to exercise wide authority emerge again.

Spielvogel, Jackson J. World History to 1800. West Educational Publishing, USA 1999.

The Kingdom of Songhai

Like the Nile in North Africa, the Niger River in West Africa floods and thus provides a rich soil for raising crops and taking care of cattle. East of Timbuktu, the river makes a wide bend. Along the river south of that bend, a people known as the Songhai established themselves. Neighboring peoples often threatened the Songhai, but they were fiercely determined to maintain their independence. In 1009, a ruler named Kossi converted to Islam and established the Dia dynasty. This first Songhai state benefited from the Muslim trade routes that linked Arabia, North Africa, and West Africa. An era of prosperity ensued with Kukya as the capital city and Gao (GAH-oh) as the chief trade center of Songhai.

Songhai, however, was soon threatened by the growing power of Mali, whose forces captured the city of Gao in 1325. After the death of Mansa Musa in 1337, several neighboring peoples attacked Mali, and it began to decline. Mali's misfortunes were Songhai's good luck. Under the leadership of Sunni Ali, who created a new dynasty—the Sunni—in 1464, Songhai began to expand.

Sunni Ali spent much of his reign on horseback and on the march as he led his army in one military campaign after another. His army had cavalry, both on horses and on camels, armed with spears and swords. It also had foot soldiers who wore padded armor and fought with spears and poisoned arrows. Two of Sunni Ali's conquests, Timbuktu and Jenne, were especially important. They gave Songhai control of the trading empire—especially the trade in salt and gold—that had made Ghana and Mali so prosperous.

In 1468, Sunni Ali conquered Timbuktu. His forces sacked the city and killed many of its inhabitants, especially Muslim leaders and scholars. After the conquest of Timbuktu, Sunni Ali gathered a navy of war canoes and blockaded the city of Jenne, located on the Niger River about 250 miles southwest of Timbuktu. After a lengthy siege, Jenne fell to Ali's forces in 1473. By having gained both Timbuktu and Jenne, Songhai now

controlled the trading empire that had made Ghana and Mali so prosperous. Sunni Ali died in the midst of an expedition when he was thrown from his horse and drowned in a river.

The Songhai Empire reached the height of its power during the reign of Muhammad Ture. A military commander and devout Muslim, Muhammad Ture overthrew the son of Sunni Ali and seized power in 1493, thus creating a new dynasty, the Askia (Askia means "usurper"). Muhammad Ture continued Sunni Ali's policy of expansion, creating an empire that stretched one thousand miles along the Niger River. He was also an able administrator who divided Songhai into provinces and appointed a governor to be in charge of each

one. The three chief cities of the empire—Gao, Timbuktu, and Jenne—prospered as never before from the salt and gold trade.

Unlike Sunni Ali, Muhammad Ture was a devout Muslim. He made a pilgrimage to Mecca that lasted two years. Although it was not as extravagant as that of Mansa Musa, Muhammad Ture's pilgrimage made a noticeable impression as the king moved in a stately procession with an armed guard of 1,500 men. Carrying 300,000 gold pieces, he bought and gave freely along his journey. As a devout Muslim, Muhammad Ture also supported Islamic scholars and restored Timbuktu as a center of Islamic learning. At Sankore University, students learned astronomy, medicine, logic, music, literature, and mathematics.

After Muhammad Ture's death in 1538, Songhai entered a period of slow decline. Near the end of the sixteenth century, that decline quickened when the forces of the sultan of Morocco occupied much of Songhai. One observer wrote, "From that moment on, everything changed. Danger took the place of security, poverty of wealth. Peace gave way to distress, disasters, and violence." By 1600, the Songhai Empire was little more than a remnant of its former glorious self.

A New Empire in Songhai

In the 1400s, disputes over succession weakened Mali. Subject peoples broke away, and the empire shriveled. By the 1460s, the wealthy trading city of Gao (gow) had become the capital of the emerging West African kingdom of Songhai (SAWNG hy).

Extending the Empire Songhai developed on the fertile region at the bend of the Niger River in present-day Mali and Niger. Between 1464 and 1492, the soldier-king Sonni Ali built the largest state that had ever existed in West Africa. Sonni Ali brought trade routes and wealthy cities like Timbuktu under his control. Unlike the rulers of Mali, he did not adopt Islam, but instead followed traditional religious beliefs.

Soon after Sonni Ali's death in 1492, however, the emperor Askia Muhammad set up a Muslim dynasty. He further expanded the territory of Songhai and improved the government. To run the empire more efficiently, he set up a bureaucracy with separate departments for farming, the military, and the treasury. Each was supervised by officials appointed by the emperor.

Like Mansa Musa, Askia Muhammad made a pilgrimage to Mecca that led to stronger ties with the wider Muslim world. Scholars from Muslim lands flocked to Askia Muhammad's court at Gao. In towns and cities across Songhai, he built mosques and opened schools for the study of the Quran.

Armies Invade From the North Although Songhai continued to prosper after Askia Muhammad's death in 1528, disputes over succession led to frequent changes in leadership. In 1549, Askia Daud became emperor, and the empire experienced a period of relative peace. After his death in 1582, succession disputes recurred and led to civil war. At this time of unrest, the sultan of Morocco Ahmad al-Mansur, sent his armies south to seize the Songhai gold and salt mines. By 1591, these invaders using gunpowder weapons, conquered the empire.

Like the Almoravids who conquered Ghana, the Moroccans were unable to rule an empire that stretched across the Sahara. Their control over the region weakened, but the glory of Songhai could not be restored.

Kingdom of Songhai

The rebellious Songhai, who were skilled traders, farmers, and fishers, were led by strong leaders. During the late A.D. 1400s their ruler, Sunni Ali, fought many territorial wars and managed to conquer the cities of Timbuktu and Djenné, expanding his empire to include most of the West African savanna. Sunni Ali was a Muslim ruler, but when he died, rule fell to his son, a non-Muslim. The Muslim population of Songhai overthrew Ali's son and brought a Muslim ruler to the throne.

Under the new ruler, **Askia Muhammad**, the Songhai Empire reached the height of its glory. Ruling from A.D. 1493 to A.D. 1528, Askia Muhammad divided Songhai into five huge provinces, each with a governor, a tax collector, a court of judges, and a trade inspector—very much like the government structure of China in the A.D. 1400s. The king maintained the peace and security of his realm with a cavalry and a navy. Timbuktu became a center of learning.

Devoted to Islam, Muhammad introduced laws based on the teachings of the holy book of Islam, the Quran (kuh•RAHN). Lesser crimes were sometimes overlooked, but those who committed major crimes such as robbery or idolatry received harsh punishments. Askia Muhammad appointed Muslim judges, assuring that Islamic laws would be upheld.

In A.D. 1528 Askia Muhammad was overthrown by his son. A series of struggles for the throne followed, leading to a weakened central government. Around A.D. 1589 the rulers of Morocco sent an army across the Sahara to attack Songhai gold-trading centers. Moroccan soldiers, armed with guns and cannons, easily defeated the Songhai forces fighting with only swords, spears, and bows and arrows. By A.D. 1600 the Songhai Empire had come to an end.

Songhai. In the early 1400s, as Mali declined under weak leadership, the province of Songhai broke away. Under its first great ruler, Sunni Ali (SOO-nee AH-lee), Songhai replaced Mali as the largest, most powerful West African trading empire. Sunni Ali kept Mali's system of provincial governors but established a civil service to ensure a stronger central government. At the empire's height under Askia (AHS-kee-uh) Muhammad in the early 1500s, its cavalry controlled the gold and salt trade in a region half the size of Europe. During Askia's reign, Timbuktu reached its height as a center of culture and learning, as students from many Muslim countries visited the Sankore mosque.

The empire's glory, however, did not last more than a hundred years. Most of the Songhai people resisted Askia's efforts to convert them to Islam and resented his reliance on Muslim advisors. Without broad public support, he was unable to ensure an orderly succession to the throne and was overthrown by his son in 1528. Continuing power struggles further weakened the government, but its collapse was the result of a military weakness. In the 1590s, Songhai's proud force of mounted lancers was defeated by a small Moroccan army. Although greatly outnumbered, the Moroccans possessed a key weapon that dramatically changed sub-Saharan warfare—the musket.