

## The Songhay Kingdom

As the power of Mali began to wane, a successor state from within the old empire was already beginning to emerge. The people of Songhay dominated the middle

areas of the Niger valley. Traditionally, the society of Songhay was made up of "masters of the soil," that is, farmers, herders, and "masters of the waters," or fishers. Songhay had begun to form in the 7th century as an independent kingdom, perhaps under a Berber dynasty. By 1010, a capital was established at Gao on the Niger River, and the rulers had become Muslims, although the majority of the population remained pagan. Dominated by Mali for a while, by the 1370s Songhay had established its independence again and began to thrive as new sources of gold from the west African forests began to pass through its territory. Gao became a large city with a resident foreign merchant community and several mosques. Under a dynamic leader, Sunni Ali (1464–1492), the empire of Songhay was forged.

Sunni Ali was a great tactical commander and a ruthless leader. His cavalry expanded the borders and seized the traditional trading cities of Timbuktu and Jenne. The middle Niger valley fell under his control, and he developed a system of provincial administration to mobilize recruits for the army and rule the far-flung conquests. Although apparently a Muslim, he met any challenge to his authority even when it came from the Muslim scholars of Timbuktu, whom he persecuted. A line of Muslim rulers who took the military title *askia* succeeded him. These rulers, especially Muhammad the Great, extended the boundaries of the empire so that by the mid-16th century Songhay dominated the central Sudan.

Life in the Songhay Empire followed many of the patterns established in the previous savanna states. The fusion of Islamic and pagan populations and traditions continued. Muslim clerics and jurists sometimes were upset by the pagan beliefs and practices that continued among the population, and even more by the local interpretation of Islamic law. They wanted to impose a strict interpretation of the law of Islam and were shocked that men and women mixed freely in the markets and streets, that women went unveiled.

Songhay remained the dominant power in the region until the end of the 16th century. In 1591, a Muslim army from Morocco, equipped with muskets, crossed the Sahara and defeated the vastly larger forces of Songhay. This sign of weakness stimulated internal revolts against the ruling family, and eventually the parts of the old empire broke away.

The demise of the Songhay imperial structure did not mean the end of the political and cultural tradition of the western Sudan. Other states that combined Muslim and pagan traditions rose among the Hausa peoples of northern Nigeria, based on cities such as Kano and Katsina. The earliest Muslim ruler of Kano took control in the late 14th century and turned the city

into a center of Muslim learning. In Kano and other Hausa cities of the region, an urbanized royal court in a fortified capital ruled over the animistic villages, where the majority of the population lived. With powerful cavalry forces these states extended their rule and protected their active trade in salt, grains, and cloth. Although these later Islamicized African states tended to be small and their goals were local, they reproduced many of the social, political, and religious forms of the great empires of the grasslands.

Beyond the Sudan, Muslim penetration came in various forms. Merchants became established in most of the major trading cities, and religious communities developed in each of these, often associated with particular families. Networks of trade and contact were established widely over the region as merchants and groups of pastoralists established their outposts in the area of Guinea. Muslim traders, herders, warriors, and religious leaders became important minorities in these segmented African societies, composed of elite families, occupational groups, free people, and slaves. Inter-marriage often took place, but Muslim influence varied widely from region to region. Nevertheless, families of traders and lineages that became known as specialists in Muslim law spread widely through the region, so that by the 18th century Muslim minorities were scattered widely throughout west Africa, even in areas where no Islamicized state had emerged.



Leo Africanus's Description of West Africa

Doiker

## The Kingdom of Songhai

West Africa had been penetrated from across the Sahara since ancient times, and contact undoubtedly increased after the establishment of Muslim control over the Mediterranean coastal regions. Muslim traders crossed the desert carrying Islamic values, political culture, and legal traditions along with their goods. The early stage of state formation had culminated with the kingdom of Mali, symbolized by the renowned Mansa Musa, whose pilgrimage to Mecca in the fourteenth century had left an indelible impression on observers (see Chapter 8).

After Mali's decline, it was succeeded by the kingdom of Songhai. Under King Askia Mohammed (1493–1528), the leader of a pro-Islamic faction who had seized power from members of the original founding family, the state increasingly relied on Islamic institutions and ideology to strengthen national unity and centralize authority (see the box on p. 379). Askia Mohammed himself embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca and was recognized by the caliph of Cairo as the Muslim ruler of the Niger River valley. On his return from Mecca, he tried to revive Timbuktu as a major center of Islamic learning but had little success in converting his subjects. He did preside over a significant increase in trans-Saharan trade, which provided a steady source of income to Songhai and other kingdoms in the region. Despite the efforts of Askia

Mohammed and his successors, centrifugal forces within Songhai eventually led to its breakup after his death.

The period of Songhai's decline was also a time of increased contact with Europeans. The English, the French, and the Dutch all became active in the West African trade in the mid-sixteenth century. The Dutch, in particular, encroached on the Portuguese spheres of influence. During the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch seized a number of Portuguese forts along the West African coast while at the same time taking over the bulk of the Portuguese trade across the Indian Ocean.

## Spielvogel

### 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, disaster, and violence." By 1600, the Songhai Empire was little more than a remnant of its former glorious self.