

Gervanna Stephens

Instructor – Mrs. Fiona Dyer-Wilson

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Evaluate the factors which contributed to the rise and fall of the Ancient African Kingdoms of –
Ghana, Mali and Songhai.

The West African kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhai were great empires in their own right between the 9th and 16th centuries CE¹. This essay seeks to resolve the features of their rise to such heights of greatness and their eventually decline.

The empire of Ghana was one of three great West African empires of the medieval period that were described by Arab travelers and geographers. An empire is formed when one kingdom becomes more powerful than its neighbors. The more powerful king forms an empire by conquering his weaker rivals and adding their lands and wealth to his kingdom.²

By A.D. 200, trade across the Sahara had existed for centuries. However, this trade remained infrequent and irregular because of the harsh desert conditions. Most pack animals—oxen, donkeys, and horses could not travel very far in the hot, dry Sahara without rest or water. Then, in the third century A.D., Berber nomads began using camels. The camel could plod steadily over much longer distances, covering as much as 60 miles in a day. In addition, it could travel more than ten days without water, twice as long as most pack animals. With the camel,

¹ Exploring Africa, “Studying Africa through the Social Studies – Early African History, Until 16th Century CE,” accessed April 11, 2014, <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m7a/activity3.php>

² David Conrad, *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali and Songhay* (New York: Infobase Publishing., 2010), 15.

nomads blazed new routes across the desert and trade increased. The trade routes crossed the savanna through the region farmed by the Soninke people. The Soninke people called their ruler *ghana*, or war chief. Muslim traders began to use the word to refer to the Soninke region. By the 700s, Ghana was a kingdom, and its rulers were growing rich by taxing the goods that traders carried through their territory.³

By the ninth century Ghana was approaching the fullest extent of its power and influence with territory extending to the south as far as the upper reaches of the Niger and Senegal, to the north into the desert and eastward to the Niger bend.⁴

The Soninke's early involvement with the traders of the Sahara is one reason Ghana emerged as the first of the great medieval empires.⁵ The two most important trade items were gold and salt. Gold came from a forest region south of the savanna between the Niger and Senegal rivers. Although rich in gold, West Africa's savanna and forests lacked salt, a material essential to human life. The Sahara contained deposits of salt. In fact, in the Saharan village of Taghaza, workers built their houses from salt blocks because it was the only material available.⁶

Arab and Berber traders crossed the desert with camel caravans loaded down with salt. They also carried cloth, weapons, and manufactured goods from ports on the Mediterranean. After a long journey, they reached the market towns of the savanna. Meanwhile, African traders brought gold north from the forest regions. Merchants met in trading cities, where they exchanged goods under the watchful eye of the king's tax collector. In addition to taxing trade,

³ Linda Black and Larry Krieger, *World History: Patterns of Interaction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt., 2003), 413.

⁴ Robert July, *A History of the African People* 5th ed. (Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1998), 66.

⁵ Conrad, 29.

⁶ Black and Krieger, 413.

royal officials made sure that all traders weighed goods fairly and did business according to law. Royal guards also provided protection from bandits.⁷

Another factor in the rise of Ghana is that it controlled the sources of gold.⁸ Some have called the Kingdom of Ghana the “land of gold.” The gold trade was largely responsible for the development of Ghana into a powerful, centralized kingdom. The peoples of West Africa had independently developed their own gold mining techniques and began trading with people of other regions of Africa and later Europe as well. At the time of the Kingdom of Ghana, gold was traded for salt that came down from the Sahara desert.⁹

Ghana’s king controlled trade and commanded a large army, as such, he could demand taxes and gifts from the chiefs of surrounding lands. As long as the chiefs made their payments, the king left them in peace to rule their own people. In his royal palace, the king stored gold nuggets and slabs of salt (collected as taxes). Only the king had the right to own gold nuggets, although gold dust freely circulated in the marketplace. By this means, the king limited the supply of gold and kept its price from falling. Ghana’s African ruler acted as a religious leader, chief judge, and military commander. He headed a large bureaucracy and could call up a huge army.¹⁰

Control over the gold commerce assured the prosperity of Ghana’s kings, but Ghana suffered from the competition of Awdaghost lying to the west, for they wanted to become the major terminus for the commerce across the Western Sahara. This conflict was temporarily

⁷ Ibid, 413 – 414.

⁸ Conrad, 29.

⁹ Exploring Africa, “Studying Africa through the Social Studies – Early African History, Until 16th Century CE,” accessed April 11, 2014, <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m7a/activity3.php>

¹⁰ Black and Krieger, 414.

quelled in 990 A.D., when the Soninke of Ghana captured the rival city during a period of internal dispute among the Sanhaja, and this was the peak moment of glory.¹¹

In addition to the gold trade, historians have pointed to a second important factor in the development of these West African Kingdoms. This was the use of iron. The use of iron to make tools and weapons helped some people to expand their control over neighboring people. These changes called for new forms of social organization, contributing to the development of centralized, powerful empires. Historians also say that the use of the horse and camel, along with iron, were important factors in how rulers were able to incorporate small farmers and herders into their empires.¹²

What eventually raised the Soninke kingdom to the level of an empire was its control of both regional trade and trade across the Sahara Desert. The regional trade involved the exchange of salt, copper, and dates from the Sahara. Products from the savanna areas included slaves, livestock, iron tools, iron weapons and utensils, animal hides, leather goods such as sandals, cushions, and bags, locally woven and dyed cloth, clay pottery, woven grass products such as baskets and sleeping mats, medicinal herbs, and foods such as dried fish, rice, various grains, spices, honey, and fruit. From farther south, nearer the forest, came gold and kola nuts.¹³

The constant prosperity of Ghana was difficult to maintain and in the eleventh century, the Sanhaja experienced a profound religious revival led by a particularly puritanical Muslim sect, the Almoravids. In the Sahel, this holy war took the shape of a campaign against Ghana. It is still debatable whether Kumbi fell to the Almoravid jihad as Ghana was forcibly converted to Islam or that the conversion was voluntary. The Almoravids extended their control of the desert

¹¹ July, 66.

¹² Exploring Africa, "Studying Africa through the Social Studies – Early African History, Until 16th Century CE," accessed April 11, 2014, <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m7a/activity3.php>

¹³ Conrad, 30.

trade at Ghana's expense, and though Soninke Kingdom cooperated, they gradually declined in power and wealth.¹⁴

In the 12th century, Ghana gradually lost its dominant position in the Sahel. Climate change, the desert expansion into formerly fertile land, and decades of struggle with the powerful Sanhaja groups of the Western Sahara, pushed many Soninke to move to more prosperous areas. The city of Walata, which was about 75 miles to the northeast of Kumbi Saleh, had taken over as the main southern endpoint of the trans-Saharan trade. The decline of the Soninke left a power vacuum in the Western Sudan. For a time it was filled by some smaller savanna kingdoms to the south, which were closer to rivers and lakes and where there was better rainfall. In the first half of the 13th century, the Malinke chiefdoms of the Upper Niger began to join together into a new state that would eventually rise to become the Mali Empire.¹⁵

By 1235 the kingdom of Mali had emerged. Its founders were Mande-speaking people, who lived south of Ghana. Mali's wealth, like Ghana's, was built on gold. As Ghana remained weak, people who had been under its control began to act independently. In addition, miners found new gold deposits farther east. This caused the most important trade routes to shift eastward, which made a new group of people—the people of Mali—wealthy. It also enabled them to seize power.¹⁶

Mali was an agricultural community but this by no means meant a neglect of the commercial possibilities of the trans-desert traffic. In addition to the gold supplies in the south, Mali reached out to control the salt trade of Taghaza as well as Saharan copper.¹⁷

¹⁴ July, 66.

¹⁵ Conrad, 39.

¹⁶ Black and Krieger, 415.

¹⁷ July, 67.

Mali's first great leader, Sundiata, came to power by crushing a cruel, unpopular leader. Then, in the words of a Mande oral tradition, "the world knew no other master but Sundiata." Sundiata became Mali's *mansa*, or emperor. Through a series of military victories, he took over the kingdom of Ghana and the trading cities of Kumbi and Walata. A period of peace and prosperity followed. Sundiata proved to be as great a leader in peace as he had been in war. He put able administrators in charge of Mali's finances, defense, and foreign affairs. From his new capital at Niani, he promoted agriculture and reestablished the gold-salt trade. Niani became an important center of commerce and trade. People began to call Sundiata's empire Mali, meaning "where the king lives."¹⁸

The precise extents of the empire under Sundiata are not known, but after his death in 1255 additional conquests were made by Mansa Uli and Sakura.¹⁹ The most illustrious king of Mali was Mansa Musa who reigned from about 1312 – 1337.²⁰

Like Sundiata, Mansa Musa was a skilled military leader who exercised royal control over the gold salt trade and put down every rebellion. His 100,000 man army kept order and protected Mali from attack. Under Mansa Musa, the empire expanded to roughly twice the size of the empire of Ghana. To govern his far-reaching empire, Mansa Musa divided it into provinces and appointed governors, who ruled fairly and efficiently. A devout Muslim, Mansa Musa went on a hajj to Mecca from 1324 to 1325. When he returned, he ordered the building of new mosques at the trading cities of Timbuktu and Gao. Timbuktu became one of the most important cities of the empire. It attracted Muslim judges, doctors, religious leaders, and scholars from far and wide. They attended Timbuktu's outstanding mosques and universities.²¹

¹⁸ Black and Krieger, 415.

¹⁹ July, 67.

²⁰ Ibid, 67.

²¹ Black and Krieger 416.

By the mid-14th century, when Mali was at its highest point of imperial dominance, the trans-Saharan trade had greatly increased. Because of Mansa Musa's fabulous pilgrimage and the resulting publicity in Cairo, Mali became better known in North Africa and the Middle East, and even in Europe. Stories of Mali's wealth drew increasing numbers of North Africans to trading deals across the Sahara.²²

After his death, however, his sons could not hold the empire together. The smaller states it had conquered broke off, and the empire crumbled.²³ Most of Mansa Musa's successors lacked his ability to govern well. In addition, the gold trade that had been the basis of Mali's wealth shifted eastward as new goldfields were developed elsewhere.²⁴ By the late years of the fourteenth century the problem of dynastic succession had caused a fatal weakness in the government.²⁵

Mali lost control of Timbuktu around 1433. Beyond the Niger Bend, the more distant eastern provinces, including Gao, had probably been lost before that. Sometime around 1460, a king of Gao named Sulayman Dama attacked Mema, which had been one of Mali's provinces west of Timbuktu. After Sulayman Dama, the next ruler of Gao was Sunni Ali. He transformed that kingdom into an empire that would replace Mali as the great power of the Western Sudan,²⁶ Songhay.

²² Conrad, 51.

²³ Annenberg Learner, "Collapse: Mali and Songhai," accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.learner.org/interactives/collapse/mali.html>

²⁴ Black and Krieger, 417.

²⁵ July, 68.

²⁶ Conrad, 57.

Songhay was the third of the great empires in Medieval Western Sudan. The Songhay people came to dominate the Eastern side of the Niger bend. Eventually they developed an empire that covered a vast portion of the Western Sudan.²⁷

Songhai had been an important trade center within Mali's empire, just as Mali had once been ruled by Ghana.²⁸ As Mali declined in the 1400s, people who had been under its control began to break away. Among them were the Songhai people to the east. They built up an army and extended their territory to the large bend in the Niger River near Gao. They gained control of the all important trade routes. Gao was the capital of their empire.²⁹

The Songhai had two extraordinary rulers, both of whom were Muslims. One was Sunni Ali, who built a vast empire by military conquest. Sunni Ali's rule began in 1464 and lasted almost 30 years. Sunni Ali built a professional army that had a riverboat fleet of war canoes and a mobile fighting force on horseback. Payment of tributes, which were in form of goods and contribution of workforce for further territorial expansion, placed the empire on a powerful economic and political footing. He expanded Songhai into an empire through his skill as a military commander and his aggressive leadership. In 1468, Sunni Ali achieved his first major military triumph. He captured the city of Timbuktu, which had been an important part of Mali's empire.³⁰

After Sunni Ali's death in 1492, his son succeeded him as ruler. Almost at once, the son faced a major revolt by Muslims who were angry that he did not practice their religion faithfully. The leader of the revolt was a devout Muslim named Askia Muhammad. He drove Sunni Ali's son from power and replaced him. During his 37-year rule, Askia Muhammad proved to be an

²⁷ Ibid, 59.

²⁸ Annenberg Learner, "Collapse: Mali and Songhai," accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.learner.org/interactives/collapse/mali.html>

²⁹ Black and Krieger, 417.

³⁰ Black and Krieger, 417.

excellent administrator. He set up an efficient tax system and chose able officials. Adding to the centralized government created by Sunni Ali, he appointed officials to serve as ministers of the treasury, army, navy, and agriculture. Under his rule, the well-governed empire thrived.³¹

After a long reign the Askia declined in health and energy when in 1528 he was deposed in a rebellion by his sons. This was the first of a series of coups that ensued over a sixty-year period, undermining the state, almost invariably bringing disunity and weakness, and leading to its final disintegration which came abruptly at the end of the sixteenth century.³² The riches of Songhai where its gold and salt mines were concerned also brought invaders.

In 1591, a Moroccan fighting force of several thousand men equipped with gunpowder and cannons crossed the Sahara and invaded Songhai. The Moroccan troops quickly defeated the Songhai warriors, who were armed only with swords and spears. The collapse of the Songhai Empire ended a thousand year period in which powerful kingdoms and empires ruled the central region of West Africa.³³

In the period from 400 to 1591, West Africa saw the rise and fall of the indigenous kingdoms, Ghana, Mali and Songhai. Only these three kingdoms achieved the status of full-fledged and long-lived conquest states and expansionist empires for which contact-era Islamic and European documentary histories are available. Ghana's emergence as the first of the West African empires provided the trajectory for the subsequent developments of Mali and in turn Songhai. With each kingdom, trade along the trans-Saharan network intensified for it was a critical factor underpinning the expansion, power and establishment of each kingdom. As such,

³¹ Ibid, 417.

³² July, 71.

³³ Black and Krieger, 417.

much of the wealth generated through the trading framework went to support the military arm of each empire.³⁴

Military achievement of this period pivoted around the emergence and mobilization of professional armies and cavalry forces. Ghana's achievement in this field was being the first to establish large professional armies for the maintenance of law and order over a vast territory. The kingdom of Mali contributed to the formal development and mobilization of cavalry forces in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in order to command the battlefields of the savanna and Sahel regions of West Africa. Similarly, the kingdom of Songhai employed aspects of military tactics. This entailed the use of light cavalry forces with padded armor, spears or javelins and imported swords, which proved effective in battle on the savanna but lacked the necessary resolve in the forested areas.³⁵

Throughout the course of West African history, religious doctrine served as a means to define and redefine the nature and transformation of military doctrine, political organization, and, ultimately, conquest interactions with neighbouring states. The adoption of the Islamic tradition in West African kingdoms increased social and cultural cohesiveness over a vast geographic region and brought about a new era of prosperity. On the contrary, the scorched-earth policy of empire building and the role of the jihad ultimately fed the decline of these kingdoms.³⁶

The kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhai were each great in their own right. A number of overlapping factors influenced their rise to power inclusive of trade, especially in gold and salt, military prowess, the institution of taxes and a governing administrations. Similarly, many

³⁴ Ruben Mendoza, "West African Empires, Dates: 400 – 1591 C.E.," Academia.edu, accessed April 13, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/353292/West_African_Empires_Dates_400-1591_C.E

³⁵ Ruben Mendoza, "West African Empires, Dates: 400 – 1591 C.E.," Academia.edu, accessed April 13, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/353292/West_African_Empires_Dates_400-1591_C.E

³⁶ Ruben Mendoza, "West African Empires, Dates: 400 – 1591 C.E.," Academia.edu, accessed April 13, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/353292/West_African_Empires_Dates_400-1591_C.E

factors why each declined leading to the rise of another kingdom also intertwine. Internal struggles within the kingdom tore down the cohesive structure necessary for keeping power, the military prowess and tactics of another kingdom and as such to conquer the one before it and the loss of the trade monopoly within the region all contributed to the downfall of each kingdom.

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