

The Songhai Kingdom

The Kingdom of Songhai was established in 1350 Years AD and lasted until 1600 AD when the kingdom was invaded and ransacked by forces from Morocco with substantial financial and military support from the English Tudor monarch, Queen Elizabeth 1st. There were two hundred English artillery mercenaries in the invading force. It was their devastating fire power which helped to defeat the Songhai army. This defeat led to the political and economic destabilization of the region. It was the vacuum left by the collapse of the Kingdom of Songhai which enabled the trans-Atlantic slave trade to flourish. If Songhai had remained a stable economic entity they may well have resisted the slave traders and that the history of Africa and the world may have been completely different.

Songhai was the most powerful, politically and economically, during the 15th and 16th Century after its absorption of Mali into its spheres of influence. The first rulers of what eventually became the Songhai Kingdom were the Dia who reigned the principality from 690 Years AD to 1338 AD. During this period, Kukya, was its principal city whose roots can be traced back to the time of Ancient Egypt. These important and powerful kingdoms did not emerge over night. Their roots in many cases can be traced back thousands of years. During the 9th Century the city of Gao was transformed into a major trading centre. Gao was at a strategic point for the trans-Sahara trade routes. Caravans from all over North Africa passed through it and like the city of Kumbi-Saleh it was divided into two sectors. One was for people who held traditional African beliefs and the other section was for Muslim traders and those who had converted to Islam.

Songai's first Muslim ruler called Kossoi took power in 1009AD. Gao was a prosperous city. Gold, cotton and rice were easily obtainable. Timbuktu and then Djenne were occupied. Like Timbuktu, Djenne was a city with extensive trading links and a university that was respected for its education and for its architectural brilliance.

The Songhai Kingdom was based along the Niger River. The city of Timbuktu grew and became a renowned centre of Islamic learning and of culture and trade. Djenne, a metropolis located on a tributary of the Niger River rose in influence and the expansion of the copper mining town of Takedda on the eastern Trans- Saharan trade route helped to increase the economic expansion of Songhai. The wealth and power of Songhai grew out

of the Sorko fishermen who lived alongside the Niger River and were extremely skillful canoeists. They dwelt southeast of Gao and by the 9th Century had been assimilated into Songhai, which at that time was part of the Kingdom of Mali. The people of Gao started to assert their power and to defy Mali by refusing to pay their taxes to the kingdom. The power and influence of Songhai increased under the leadership of Sonni Ali the Great who had an army of skilled cavalry divisions plus an armada of canoes, while that of Mali declined. Sonni Ali was a resourceful military leader who was well versed in deploying his military might on land and on water. His subjects and opponents also believed that he possessed magical powers. Songhai expanded the territory it controlled from the Niger Valley west to Senegal and east to Agades in present day Niger. Sonni Ali also retained the traditional African beliefs from his mother's birthplace in Soleto. Timbuktu was captured from the Tueregs and its traditions of education and scholarship were interrupted. Sonni Ali the Great was not a Muslim and Arab historians have portrayed him as ruthless and oppressive. But under his rule during the 1440's the trade which passed through the Trans-Saharan trade routes reached its peak. Along these caravan routes also came Islamic beliefs and it could be said that this has continued to the present day with trade and migration also being a vehicle for the dissemination of religious and political beliefs. Arab traders carried with them religious texts such as the Koran plus other texts written in Arabic. Many of the ruling hierarchy in Songhai converted to Islam, initially for commercial reasons. Also it has to be noted that history can be shaped and formed by the person or people who wrote it.

In 1493 Mohammed Ture took power. Unlike Sonni Ali he was a devout Muslim who originally came from Soninke. He helped to form the Askiya Dynasty. Under his stewardship Songhai expanded even further. He also started a number of jihads against other neighboring states. Although the Mossi people were conquered they never converted to Islam and as a result helped to stem the influence of Islam in Africa. Songhai became well known and respected within the Islamic Diaspora. After this period of military expansion the area that Songhai occupied was the size of Europe. Mohammed Ture embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca and on his return was made the Caliph of Sudan. His entourage on pilgrimage consisted of 1000 infantrymen plus a 500 strong cavalry division. He also carried 300,000 pieces of gold with him. His government was far more centralized than that of the previous Mansa's of Mali. Within an Islamic framework ancient African traditions such as the Sacred Fire and Sacred drum were preserved

alongside a variety of African based costumes and hairstyles. Like the Kingdom of Mali, Songhai had a caste of privileged craftsmen. Slave labour was widely used in agricultural production. Trade expanded. Gold exported increased as well as that of kola nuts and slaves. Textiles, horses, salt and luxury goods formed the core of staple imports. During the 16th Century civil war broke out in Songhai. This was partly caused by the kingdom's rapid expansion which caused the state authorities difficulties in maintaining control over the vast kingdom, leading to a series of internal revolts. The structures of the state apparatus were weakened leading to its complete collapse with the invasion by Moroccan and foreign insurgents. Climate Change was another factor leading to the decline of Songhai as a major regional power coupled with drought and disease. But the most decisive factor was the loss of control of the lucrative gold trade and the revenue that this generated for the state's exchequer. A wish to control this trade was a major factor in Morocco's decision to invade Songhai and possibly the main incentive why Britain with the backing of Queen Elizabeth 1st gave financial and militarist support for this militarist adventure. After the invasion which resulted in the looting and destruction of major cities such as Timbuktu and the imprisonment in Morocco of leading scholars and academics, Morocco showed little interest in maintaining its control over the region. The Moroccan garrison stationed in the region regularly engaged in looting and the once powerful kingdom disintegrated and collapsed. Out of its ashes emerged the Bambara Kingdom of Segi.

The Songhai Kingdom covered hundreds of years of history. Gao became its capital during the 9th Century and had a population of 100,000 people. This was far larger than most European capital cities of the same period. The kingdom also created structures which now form part of the modern state. The Askia Dynasty created a strong and cohesive government and efficient administration units. Some of the regions of Songhai were given a certain amount of economic and political autonomy similar to that which exists in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom today. Individual ministries existed which had overall control of areas such as taxation, the armed forces, trade and finance, probably similar to how governments function today. Many rich merchants lived in Gao and commodities such as bread, meat, rice, cucumbers, melons and pumpkins were readily obtainable in the market places. Again one could ask the question how much market places have changed in the last 1000 years?

Timbuktu's University Mosque had 25,000 students. Also there were another 150 schools teaching the Koran and attended by 20,000 pupils.

The city of Timbuktu had a flourishing textile industry as well as many tailors. A very profitable book trade was based in the city with the Trans-Saharan routes acting as a conduit for the transportation of these books. Timbuktu has recently opened an air conditioned Museum dedicated to the preservation of the remaining copies of these books which until recently were locked away in individual people's houses often in chests.

Djenne was a major city with 8 gates leading into it. The city of Djenne was surrounded by a network of streams and canals which went around the city's perimeter. Djenne had many buildings 2 storey high and some of these houses had drainage systems installed at a time when European cities like London simply emptied human waste into the street causing disease and ill health. Gold coinage was in use as a means of currency as well as pieces of iron which were used to purchase cheaper goods. Agades, another important trading centre and city had a population of 70,000, many of whom lived in splendid houses.

As mentioned previously the Kingdom of Songhai came to an abrupt end. In October 1590, Moroccan forces led by Judar Pashar overran and ransacked the cities of Djenne, Gao and Timbuktu and proceeded to burn and loot the surrounding countryside. The Moroccan forces with their European mercenaries adopted a scorched earth policy. Many thousands of people lost their lives in this invasion which was supported financially and militarily by Queen Elizabeth 1st, the Tudor queen of England. Militarily hardware and fighting men were supplied by the English establishment. This support included 200 infantrymen. Without this fire power which helped to devastate the armies of Songhai, the invading army might have been defeated and the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade might have panned out completely differently. Quite likely an undefeated Songhai Dynasty would not have participated in this European slave trade and future colonial powers may have found it harder to have such an influence in this region if it had not been destroyed by the invading Moroccan forces.

The seeds of England's involvement in the colonization of Africa and its participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade could have started in earnest with its financial and military involvement in the overthrow and destruction of the Songhai Kingdom. Requests for arms by Juadar Pashar to Queen Elizabeth 1st were first made on June 23rd 1590. There were 2,500 Europeans in Al Monsur's first division. A majority of the artillery men were English and Judar Pashar was Spanish. This massive fire power

wreaked havoc on the 18,000 strong Songhai cavalry division and its army of nearly 10,000 foot soldiers. The vanquishing army wholesale looted Songhai and gold dust, musk, slaves and ebony were transported back north to Morocco.

In the following year Judar Pashar was replaced by Mahmud Ben Zergeun. He proceeded to over run the University of Sankore. The professors were taken in chains across the desert to Morocco. Many died en-route. The immense university library was mindlessly destroyed and Timbuktu was raised to the ground. This wholesale destruction and the fall of Songhai coincided with the beginnings of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Classroom Activities for the teaching of The Kingdom of Songhai

1. Write your own history of Songhai in no more than 100 words. Compare and contrast the written versions. Discuss in small groups whether you believe that history is shaped by the people who write it. Use your own historical accounts and other historical sources to back up your ideas. Feed back by each group to whole class.
2. Compare and contrast the differences in the Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhai.
3. Create a board game charting the rise and decline of these kingdoms. The board game could focus on one kingdom or fuse all kingdoms. Include historical facts reflecting the rise and decline. Each group will then play their board game with another group. At the end of the game, participants write down the main facts that they have learnt by playing the game.
4. How much do you think market places in Africa and where you live have changed in the past 2 thousand years?
5. In small groups write a play script depicting the rise and fall of one of the major West African kingdoms. Each group then performs the play in front of class. This could be a multi-media presentation.