

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Section 1: Empire of Ghana

GHANA CONTROLS TRADE

Ghana (GAH-nuh) was the first West African empire to profit from Saharan trade by controlling trade routes. Ghana lay between the Niger and Senegal rivers in sub-Saharan Africa, northwest of the nation now called Ghana.

Historians think the first people in Ghana were farmers. Starting around 300 these farmers began to be threatened by nomadic herders who wanted the water and pastures. For protection, small groups began to band together. This cooperation grew stronger with the introduction of farming tools and weapons made of iron.

Ghana's territory lay between the desert and the forests, areas rich with salt and gold. The gold and salt trade followed a **process** called **silent barter**, in which people exchange goods without contacting each other directly. This ensured peaceful business and kept the location of the gold mines secret.

The rulers of Ghana, strengthened by trade and increased populations, took control of the trade routes previously run by local tribes. A large trading city, Koumbi Saleh (KOOM-bee SAHL-uh), became a regular travelers' stop.

GHANA BUILDS AN EMPIRE

By 800 Ghana was firmly in control of West Africa's trade routes. As a result, trade became safer and Ghana's influence increased. Traders were charged a tax to enter or leave Ghana. The kings made it illegal for anyone other than themselves to own gold. They also taxed the people of Ghana.

The kings increased the size of Ghana by conquering other tribes. However, Ghana's kings allowed local conquered rulers to retain much of their own power. These kings acted as governors of their territories. The empire of Ghana reached its peak under **Tunka Manin** (TOOHN-kah MAH-nin).

GHANA'S DECLINE

By the end of the 1000s, Ghana had collapsed. Three major factors contributed to its decline. A group of Muslim Berbers called the Almoravids invaded and weakened the empire. These Berbers were herders, and their animals overgrazed and ruined the farmland. Many farmers left. At the same time, internal rebellions led to Ghana's loss of control over trade routes.

Section 2: Empire of Mali

SUNDIATA MAKES MALI AN EMPIRE

Like Ghana, Mali (MAH-lee) lay along the upper Niger River. This area's fertile soil helped Mali grow. In addition, Mali's location on the Niger River allowed its people to control trade on the river. Mali's rise to power began under a ruler named **Sundiata** (soohn-JAHT-ah).

Many legends about this period claim that Sundiata was both a warrior and a magician. According to these legends, Sundiata was a son of the king of Mali. A cruel ruler conquered Mali when Sundiata was a boy. When Sundiata grew older, he gathered a huge army and won Mali's independence. Then he conquered nearby kingdoms, including Ghana, and took over the salt and gold trades.

Sundiata rebuilt the overgrazed farmlands. He introduced new crops like cotton. He put soldiers to work in the fields. He also took over both the religious and political authority previously held by local leaders.

MANSA MUSA

Mali's greatest and most famous ruler was a Muslim named **Mansa Musa** (MAHN-sah moo-SAH). Under his leadership, Mali reached the height of its wealth, power, and fame. Because of Mansa Musa's influence, Islam spread through a large part of West Africa.

Mansa Musa ruled Mali for about 25 years, during which he captured many important trading cities. He also made the world aware of Mali by making his pilgrimage to Mecca, where he introduced himself to every official he met.

Mansa Musa sent scholars to study the Qur'an and Arabic in Morocco. He established Arabic schools in Mali, where the Qur'an and other literature were available to all who wanted to study. The Mali capital of Timbuktu (time-buhk-roo) became a great center of Islamic culture. Arabic became the main language of both religion and government. Mansa Musa built mosques in Mali's cities, but he did not force Islam on anyone who chose not to practice it.

THE FALL OF MALI

Unfortunately, not all of Mali's leaders were as strong as Mansa Musa. After he died, invaders and uprisings tore apart the large and unwieldy empire. Invaders destroyed the great schools and mosques of Timbuktu. Rebel groups seized the city. By 1500 nearly all of the lands the empire had once ruled were lost.

Section 3: Empire of Songhai

THE SONGHAI BUILD AN EMPIRE

As Mali weakened, a people called the Songhai (SAHNG-hy) grew in strength. These people gave their name to the last of the great West African trade empires.

Songhai's founders were Berbers from North Africa who began settling along the big bend of the Niger River in the 700s. In this inland delta area, the river brings precious water to an otherwise dry region. Soon the settlers had built villages and were trading on the river. Trade brought the Songhai into contact with Muslims. By the 1000s, many of the Songhai had converted to Islam.

In the 1300s the lands of the Songhai lay within the empire of Mali, which was at the height of its power. However, the Songhai did not like living under Mali's rule. As Mali weakened, the Songhai broke free. Then in 1468, Songhai leader **Sunni Ali** (SOOH-nee ah-LEE) captured the trade centers of Timbuktu and Djenné, and eventually all of Mali. He went on to develop trade centers and build up his capital, Gao. From Gao, Sunni Ali made Songhai into an empire famous for its wealth.

ASKIA THE GREAT

Sunni Ali and Sunni Baru, his son who followed him as ruler, were not Muslims. But most of the people of the empire's towns were Muslim. They feared that if Sunni Baru did not support Islam they would lose trade and power, so they rebelled. After overthrowing Sunni Baru, the leader of that rebellion became known as **Askia the Great**.

Muslim culture and education thrived during Askia's reign, as they had under Mansa Musa. Timbuktu's schools of learning were strengthened and began to attract students from as far away as Europe. Djenné also became a center of learning, especially for medical science. Doctors in Djenné discovered that mosquitoes spread malaria.

To rule Songhai effectively, Askia divided the empire into five regions. He created **various** departments in charge of special tasks, much like governments today. He also improved banking methods and standardized currency.

SONGHAI FALLS TO MOROCCO

Askia the Great lost power to his son in 1528. Morocco, a country to the north, invaded Songhai. They attacked and looted both Timbuktu and Gao. Songhai never recovered. Overland trade declined. Other trade centers north and south of the old empire grew and became more important. That completed Songhai's downfall.

Section 4: Historical and Artistic Traditions

STORYTELLERS MAINTAIN ORAL TRADITIONS

Although cities like Timbuktu and Djenné were known for their universities and libraries, writing was not common in West Africa. Arabic was the only written language, and those who could read and write it were mainly government and religious officials. Instead of writing their history, West Africans passed along information about their civilization through **oral history** in their native languages.

The task of remembering and telling West Africa's history was entrusted to storytellers called **griots** (GREE-ohz). Griots tried to make their stories entertaining. They also told **proverbs**, or short sayings of wisdom or truth. The griots had to memorize hundreds of names and dates. Some griots confused names and events in their heads, so some stories might become distorted. Still, much knowledge could be gained by listening to a griot. The histories of empires were often told as epic poems, long poems about kingdoms and heroes.

VISITORS WRITE HISTORIES

Though the West Africans left no written histories, visitors from other parts of the world did write about the region. Much of what we know about early West Africa comes from the writings of travelers and scholars from Muslim lands such as Spain and Arabia. Some of these writers include al-Masudi, al-Bakri, Ibn Battutah, and Leo Africanus.

WEST AFRICANS VALUE ARTS

Besides storytelling, West African cultures considered other art forms, including sculpture, mask-making, cloth-making, music, and dance just as important. West African artists made sculptures of people from wood, brass, clay, ivory, stone, and other materials. Some of these images have inspired modern artists like Matisse and Picasso.

West Africans are also known for distinctive mask-making and textiles. Particularly prized is the brightly colored **kente** (ken-TAY), a hand-woven cloth that was worn by kings and queens on special occasions.

In many West African societies, music and dance were as important as the visual arts. Singing and dancing were great entertainment, but they also helped people celebrate their history and were central to many religious celebrations.