

## 25. Rise of West African Kingdoms AD 700-1800

During the years of Islamic dominance in North Africa, four great trading empires arose in the Sahel region of western Africa.

### Ghana 700-1200 A.D.

The first great empire to arise was Ghana, with roots going back to 300 A.D., as we have already mentioned. It is thought by archaeologists to have originated at Kumbi Saleh in Maritania, 300 miles west southwest of Timbuktu (called Kumbi). Some say its first rulers were not black—perhaps Jews who had fled there after rebelling against the Romans in 115 A.D. in Cyrenaica and later intermarried with the pastoral Fulani people. Others say the first rulers were white Berbers.

Mining was prominent in Ghana, and was controlled by priest-shamans. Masudi, an Arab voyager and citizen of Baghdad, was the first to record the unusual gold trade of the early Ghana empire. Other early recorded accounts of Ghana include the 11<sup>th</sup> century Arab geographers who journeyed to western Africa, the log books of Arab explorers and Barbary pirates, and especially a scholar Abu Obei El-Bekri, an Arab from Spain and student of North African history. Some of these geographical works are now housed in the British Museum in London and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Ghana was strategically located at the southern end of several caravan routes across the Sahara, so that she had contact both with North Africa and with the east. Many people of the time used the term “Sudan” vaguely to include the whole area from the Red Sea to the Atlantic, which area included the Ghana Empire. The Kingdom had 22 kings before the Islamic Hegira. At its height the empire included Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Guinea, and part of Mauretania.

### Mali 1200-1550

The second great empire was Mali, which, growing out of the Kingdom of the Mandingoes, a branch of the Soninke rulers of Ghana, absorbed and expanded the Kingdom of Ghana. It was a trading empire founded by the Mandingo King Sundiata.

### “Timbuktu”

The renowned city Timbuktu lies at the bend of the Niger River where it meets the Sahara desert. When the kingdom of Ghana adopted Islam in 1076, Timbuktu was only a seasonal camp of the nomadic Tuareg people. It was a place where travelers by land and by water met. Soon after, it became a major crossroads, a center of Islamic culture and learning for African Muslims. It was conquered by Morocco in 1591.

Timbuktu was by far the most famous city of Mali. Herodotus wrote of a “Silent Trade” conducted by the kings of Timbuktu, and Leo Africanus, a sixteenth century Granada Moor, wrote that the city was rich in gold. In 1336 the Emperor of Mousa, returning from Mecca, had a Great Mosque erected there.

Mali was settled by the Mandinka or Mandingo peoples, whose capital was Kangaba on the Niger River. They carried on an active program of agricultural expansion, and formed the first African Islamic Empire. Their kings were known in Egypt as the kings of Tekrur, and their emperor Mansa Musa went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 preceded by 500 slaves with golden staffs and 100 camels laden with gold. This may be partly responsible for exaggerated stories that roofs of houses in Timbuktu were covered with gold. The city was not explored by Europeans until 1828.

The Kingdom of Mali was conquered by Islam in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, thus becoming an Islamic Kingdom. It later gradually dispersed as the influence of the Songhay Kingdom spread.

#### Songhay (Pronounced Song-Ray) 1350-1600

The third great empire, Songhay, slowly usurped the territory of Mali. The history of the Songhay (Songali) people goes back to about 700 A.D. They were first ruled by a dynasty of Berbers who had fled Libya during the first Arab conquest. Their first home was Dendi just above the Busa rapids of Nigeria. Their ancient capital was called Kukia on the right bank of the Niger River. (The city no longer exists.) The Songhay had Islamic rulers beginning in 1009, and chose the title Sonni. They subdued the area, capturing Timbuktu in 1468.

#### Camerounian Civilization of Sao

The Sao civilization grew up in northern Cameroun around Lake Chad. Archaeologists know that this area was inhabited from the fifth century B.C. and was known up to the fifteenth century A.D. Arab historians and geographers also spoke of the Sao.

#### Camerounian Civilization of Kotoko

The Kotoko civilization followed the Sao. The Kotoko Empire was centered south of Lake Chad and included the small kingdoms of Ngala, Afade, Maffae, Souieil, Mora, Makari, Kousseri, Songai, and Longane-Birni.

#### Camerounian Civilization of Mande

The Mande civilization flourished at the same time as the Kotoko. It was centered between Bornu in the north, Baguirni and Kotoko in the northeast, and the pagan civilization in the south.

#### Camerounian Civilization of Fulge

The Fulbe also flourished at the same time as the Mande and Kotoko. They were nomadic shepherds from Futa Jallon who infiltrated everywhere in Cameroun.

#### Sudanese Populations

The northern Sudanese populations included the Tikar, who were known as great warriors; the Babouts, the Baya, the "Kirdi" (pagans). The southern populations included the Adamawa

peoples who started migrations, mainly the Beti and the Douala (Barkeri and other groups) who migrated to the Congo.

#### Kanem-Bornu 800-1800

The Muslim Kingdom of Kanem Bornu (previously called Zaghawa) was located to the east in Sudan. It did not grow out of the Ghana-Mali-Songhay complex, but developed separately in the interior. The height of its power was reached about 1571 A.D. under King Idris III. He had a walled capital Ngazargamu in Bornu and had vast numbers of slaves. The kingdom was a federation of autonomous provinces like Ghana and Mali. Its legendary founder, Sef, is said to have come from the east and have given his name to the Beni-Sef dynasty. He was followed by Mai Douga (784-835) who laid the true foundations of the kingdom.

#### New kinds of Food

The diet of west Africans was enriched with the introduction of maize and the currently popular cassava from South America in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17 centuries.