9.9: The Western Sudanic States

Who comes to mind as the richest person ever? Many economists and historians propose a person who might surprise you: Mansa Musa. Mansa Musa was an emperor in the Western Sudan during the Middle Ages. He was so rich that the people of his own time could not even fathom his wealth. Unable to put a dollar amount on Mansa Musa’s bewilderingly large fortune, Rudolph Ware, a current professor at the University of Michigan, instructs us to “imagine as much gold as you think a human being could possess and double it...”¹⁰ Other sources estimate that, adjusted for inflation, Mansa Musa was worth $400 billion.¹¹ How did Mansa Musa become so wealthy? Like the other Western Sudanic rulers, he controlled much of the world’s access to gold during a period when gold was in very high demand.

Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): Map of Western Sudan | The area highlighted in green is the Western Sudan. In the Middle Ages, African kings used their monopoly over west African gold to build a series of large empires in the Western Sudan.
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Map \(\PageIndex{1}\) shows the large area in West Africa commonly referred to as the **Western Sudan**. The Western Sudan does not correspond with a modern-day African country; instead, it is a region. Arabic-speaking travelers gave
the region its name, calling it *bilad-al-Sudan* or the “Land of Blacks.” The Western Sudan encompasses the Sahel and some of its surrounding grasslands from the Atlantic coast in the east through Lake Chad in the west. **The Sahel**, which in Arabic means “the shore,” is a transition zone between the Sahara Desert to its north and the more forested regions to its south. Much of the Sahel is grassland savannah. Straddling regions with different climates, the people of the Western Sudan developed productive agriculture, trade networks, and an urban culture. The architecture of the Western Sudanic states stands out for its use of mud (adobe) to construct its monumental buildings, such as the Great Mosque in Djenne (Figure 1), and Aksia the Great’s tomb in Gao (Figure 2). From roughly 800 to 1600 CE, the people of this region organized and supported—sometimes under duress—the large states that dominated the Western Sudan. Three of the best known of these states became the empires of Ghana (800 – 1070s CE), Mali (1230s – 1430s CE), and Songhai (1460s – 1591 CE).

The leaders of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai came to dominate the region because they controlled access to West African gold. An increase in the demand for West African gold corresponded with the rise of these empires. The spread of Islam and rise of new states along the North African coast and in Europe gave the biggest boost to the demand for gold. Monarchs in Europe and North Africa wanted West African gold to mint coins. To meet the demand, Berber traders used newly introduced camels to carry gold north across the desert. Then, they loaded up their camels with big slabs of salt to return south. The people in many parts of West Africa considered salt a valuable commodity due to their distance from the ocean and the time required to extract salt from plant, animal, and other resources. While the demands for gold and salt drove the trade, weapons, manufactured goods, slaves, textiles, and manuscripts also passed through the desert. With the flow of all of these goods, the Western Sudanic states emerged at the nexus of the trans-Saharan trade routes.

The North African Berber traders crossing the Sahara Desert were early converts to Islam, and they introduced Islam to market towns of the Western Sudanic states. With continuing trade, the region’s connections with Northeast Africa and the Middle East grew through the Middle Ages. Growing urban areas, like Timbuktu, attracted Muslim scholars. In later centuries, the kings of Mali and Songhai deliberately fostered these connections with the larger Islamic World due to their religious beliefs and, sometimes, to enhance their status and secure their positions. For example, Askia Muhammad, the king of Songhai from 1495 to 1528, successfully sought recognition as the “caliph of Sudan” from Egyptian rulers. The new title brought him prestige within the Islamic world and Africa. Therefore, trans-Saharan trade brought Islam to the Western Sudan, and many of the kings of Mali and Songhai cultivated their relationships with Muslims in Northeast Africa and the Middle East. As a result, Islam influenced the culture and lifestyle, particularly of urban residents, in the Western Sudan.
9.7.1: Ghana

We associate the first powerful empire, Ghana (800 – 1070s CE), with people who spoke the Soninke language and lived in the area between the Niger and Senegal Rivers—parts of present-day Mauritania and Mali. In this region, agricultural productivity supported labor specialization, urban areas, and eventually state formation. From as early as 300 BCE, the region’s farmers used iron tools to grow an abundance of crops. Archaeological evidence found at Djenne-Jeno, one of the earliest urban areas in the Western Sudan, which has been dated to approximately 250 BCE, suggests that people had access to plenty of rice, millet, and vegetables. Iron technologies also allowed craftsmen to make iron spears and swords so people could protect themselves. Probably for defense purposes, Soninke speakers began joining together to form the ancient state of Ghana around 300 CE. Then, as the populations continued to grow, the state expanded its territory.

Even before Ghana was a state with a clearly defined centralized administration, Soninke speakers had been involved in extensive systems of trade using the region’s complex river systems. They often acted as middlemen, trading in fish from the rivers, meat from herders, and grains from farmers. After 300 CE, Ghanian leadership began collecting tributary payments from neighboring chiefdoms. In the centuries that followed, Ghana’s leaders used their ability to tax trade to build an empire. By 800 CE, they had consolidated their control over trade, their authority over urban areas, and their reign over tributary states.

Map: Map of the Trans-Saharan Trade Routes | Note how the routes crossed to settlements, like Koumbi Saleh, Gao, and Timbuktu, that began as market towns before growing into state capitals and cities of Muslim scholarship. The map also shows the origins of the gold in the region’s southern forested areas. The sites where the gold originated are appropriately shaded to indicate the gold mines at Bambuk, Bouré, and Lobi. Author: User “As77zz” 
Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC0 1.0
Especially in the minds of the Arab scholars chronicling the history of this period, the gold trade defined Ghana. They heard about the large caravans with hundreds of camels passing through the Sahara Desert on their way to and from Ghana. To build their fortunes, the Ghanian kings taxed trade goods twice. They taxed gold when it was initially brought from the forested regions in the south to their market towns and again right as the Berber traders departed for the north. News of Ghana’s wealth spread to the extent that Medieval Arab scholars who had never even traveled to Africa wrote about the Ghanian kings. In one manuscript, Al-Bakri, an eleventh century geographer based in Muslim Spain, described how a Ghanian king was adorned in gold and guarded by dogs wearing gold and silver collars. According to Al-Bakri, the king demonstrated his power having his subjects “fall on their knees and sprinkle dust on their heads” upon entering his presence. The kings shored up their power through their ostentatious displays of gold and their monopoly over trade. Al-Bakri recognized the centrality of gold to the finances of the Ghanian kings. According to him, the kings claimed all of the gold nuggets for themselves, leaving only gold dust for everyone else. By this time, the Ghanian kings had also used their wealth to build strong armies, with archers and calvary, to collect tribute and carry out the empire’s expansion.

Al-Bakri’s depiction of Ghana’s capital city, Koumbi Saleh, also evidences the introduction of Islam to the region. He described two separate sites within the capital city, Koumbi-Saleh. To trade their wares, the merchants used one site, which was clearly Muslim with mosques, while the king lived in a royal palace six miles away. The separation between the sites and lack of mosques near the royal palace suggest that Islam had primarily impacted the market towns; the leadership and masses of Ghana did not convert.

9.7.2: The Mali Empire

Due to attacks from the Muslim Almoravids from the North, issues with overgrazing, and internal rebellions, Ghana declined in the eleventh century, opening up an opportunity for the rise of Mali. The origins of the Mali Empire (Map \(\PageIndex{4}\)) are associated with the king Sundiata Keita (c. 1217 – 1255 CE). An epic, recounted orally by griots for centuries and written down in various forms in the twentieth century, relates the story of Sundiata’s rise. One version written by Guinean D. T. Niani in 1960 follows Sundiata as he overcomes a number of challenges, like being unable to walk until he is seven years old, being banished by a cruel stepmother, and facing tests given by witches. With loyal followers and the attributes of a born leader, Sundiata overcomes these and other challenges in the epic to found the new empire. Under Sundiata, some of Mali’s leadership converted to Islam; however, even with conversion, they maintained important pre-Islamic traditions. The epic demonstrates the prevalence of syncretism or the blending of religious beliefs and practices in West Africa. For instance, the epic traces Sundiata’s background back to Bilali Bounama, one of the early followers of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, and the powerful pre-Islamic, local clans of the lion and the buffalo. According to oral tradition, Sundiata’s ability to draw from both Muslim and traditional African sources of strength allows him to overcome adversity and defeat his less worthy opponents.
Map \(\PageIndex{4}\): The Mali Empire, c. 1350 CE | The empire encompassed over 400,000 miles, including territory in the Sahara Desert, through the Sahel, and into some of the coastal forest. The empire's control over such a large area meant access to a wide range of crops, facilitating agricultural specialization and trade. Author: User “Astrokey44”

Like Sundiata, most of the subsequent kings of Mali combined Muslim and local religious traditions. For example, they often completed the “Fifth Pillar” of Islam by performing the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca required of all able Muslims. In the meanwhile, they continued to use pre-Islamic amulets, maintain their animistic beliefs, and consider pre-Islamic sacred sites to be important. Similarly, when they converted, the people living within Mali’s cities and those involved in trans-Saharan trade also blended Muslim and traditional beliefs and practices.

Sundiata built the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century and the empire reached its height under Mansa Musa (c. 1280 – 1337 CE), in the early fourteenth century. Through diplomacy and military victories, Sundiata swayed surrounding leaders to relinquish their titles to him. Thus, Sundiata established a sizeable empire with tributary states and became the mansa, or emperor, of Mali. Most of the subsequent mansas of Mali maintained their control over the gold-salt trade, the basis of their wealth. Mali also developed a more diversified economy and was recognized in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East as a prosperous trading center.

Figure \(\PageIndex{5}\): The Great Mosque in Djenne | The Great Mosque in Djenne demonstrates the regional architectural style of the Western Sudan. The original structure was likely built in the thirteenth century. The current mosque was rebuilt in the early twentieth century. The wooden scaffolding gives the structure support and also helps men replaster the exterior, which they do every year. The exterior of the mosque is plastered in mud (adobe). Author: User “Ruud Zwart” Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0
Mansa Musa, who was likely Sundiata’s grandson or grandnephew, further developed the empire and made it one of the crossroads of the Medieval Islamic World. Mansa Musa used a large army of approximately 100,000 soldiers to reunify the empire after several tumultuous decades. Under Mansa Musa, Mali stretched much farther east, west, and south than had its predecessor kingdom, Ghana. With its access to very diverse environments, trade in agricultural produce became more important in Mali than it had been in Ghana. Farmers specialized in regional crops and the state operated farms where slaves grew food for the royal family and the army. Mansa Musa also developed the empire’s administration, dividing the territory into provinces and appointing competent governors. With all of these achievements, Mansa Musa is best remembered for going on the hajj from 1324 to 1325 CE. He attracted a great deal of attention traveling in a huge caravan made up of almost 100 camels, 12,000 slaves, and an estimated 30,000 pounds of gold. Local lore claims that he gave out so much gold during his three month stay in Cairo that the price of gold dropped by 25%. Likewise, reportedly after he passed through Alexandria, the value of gold in the city stayed low for a decade. Mansa Musa’s impressive display in Northeast Africa and the Middle East boosted Mali’s standing in the Islamic World. After his return to Mali, Mansa Musa further cultivated Islamic connections by building new mosques and schools. He hosted Muslim scholars and made cities, including Timbuktu, Djenne, and Gao, into centers of learning. Mansa Musa also encouraged the use of Arabic, and the libraries, especially of Timbuktu, became repositories of Islamic manuscripts. The Catalan Atlas (Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\)) demonstrates Mansa Musa’s preeminence. Commissioned by Charles V of France, the 1375 map shows Mansa Musa ruling his empire. He sits atop a gold throne, wearing a gold crown, carrying a gold sceptre, and gauging (or perhaps admiring) a gold nugget. Awash in gold in the Catalan Atlas, Mansa Musa paid for his various projects by collecting tribute from surrounding states and taxing trans-Saharan and inter-regional trade.

Several factors, such as weak leadership, foreign invasions, and rebellions within the tributary states, led to the decline of Mali after Mansa Musa’s death. The empire got increasingly smaller through the early fifteenth century. With the decline of Mali, leaders in one of its breakaway tributary states, Songhai (alternatively spelled Songhay), expanded militarily and encroached on Mali’s territory. By the late 1460s when he captured Timbuktu, Songhai’s leader Sunni Ali had begun to build a new empire, the Songhai Empire, through military conquest.
9.7.3: Songhai

The Songhai Empire is most closely associated with the Sorko people who lived alongside the Niger River, southeast of Gao. By about 800 CE, the Sorko had created their own state, Songhai, trading along the river and building a military that used war canoes. With the growth of trans-Saharan trade and eventually the discovery of new gold fields, the Sorko and other ethnic groups in the area established market towns in Songhai. Most of the people who moved to these market towns converted to Islam by the eleventh century. In the early fourteenth century, the Mali Empire collected tribute from Gao, though other parts of the Songhai state remained independent. Using his military to pick off pieces of Mali in its waning years, Sunni Ali built the Songhai state into an empire in the 1460s.

During its Golden Age, the Songhai Empire was ruled by Askia Mohammad I (r. 1493 – 1528). Referred to as Askia the Great, Askia Mohammad I was a devout Muslim, who centralized the empire’s administration, encouraged agriculture, and further expanded the state. Askia rose to power as the general-in-chief of the army of Gao. He won a military victory over Sunni Ali’s son to found a new dynasty, the Askia dynasty. As a devout Muslim, Askia went on the hajj to Mecca from 1496 – 1497. The pilgrimage brought him international recognition and reinforced his claims to power especially because the Sharif of Mecca bestowed Askia with the title “the Caliph of the Sudan.” Upon his return, Askia used Islam to validate attacks on neighboring states, like the Mossi in 1498. He also rebuilt Islamic centers. Leo Africanus, originally from Granada (Spain), traveled through Timbuktu in 1526 and wrote,

[…] There are in Timbuktu numerous judges, teachers, and priests, all properly appointed by the king. He greatly honors learning. Many hand-written books imported from Barbary [the coastal regions of North Africa] are also sold. There is more profit made from this commerce than from all other merchandise.13

Under Askia, Timbuktu, Djenne, and Gao, once again, beckoned scholars and people with commercial aspirations. Taxing gold remained an important source of revenue for the king, but trade expanded to incorporate items such as manuscripts, kola nuts, prisoners of war (who were sold as slaves), horses, and cowry shells (which were used as an internal currency). Additionally, to centralize his administration, Askia appointed loyal Muslim governors to new provinces, replacing hereditary rulers. After his death, Askia’s sons, particularly his last son, Askia Dawud (r. 1549 –
1582 CE) continued to generate wealth by taxing trans-Saharan trade. Like their father, they also tended to invest in Songhai’s Islamic centers. For example, during the reign of Dawud, there were approximately one hundred and fifty Islamic schools operating in Timbuktu. Askia Dawud’s death in 1582 saw the reemergence of power struggles amongst competing rulers and rebellions within tributary states, signaling the end of the Golden Age of Songhai.

Then, the biggest blow to the crumbling Songhai Empire came from the invasion by Morocco in 1591. The Moroccan army used new technology, muzzle-loading firearms, to defeat the Songhai troops. The Songhai state limped along until 1737, but after 1591, it was no longer a unified empire with control over numerous tributary states. For almost 1,000 years, large empires had dominated the Sahel. The leaders of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, each in turn, taxed trans-Saharan trade and grew powerful. They built their empires with urban centers, strong militaries, and numerous tributary states. However, the Moroccan invasion eroded their power. Furthermore, the Age of Exploration, begun by the Portuguese in their progress down the West Africa coast in the fifteenth century, redirected trade. Trans-Saharan trade diminished and was largely replaced by trade up and down the Atlantic coast of West Africa.


11 “Musa’s Money.” BBC. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02f9r6g
