

CHAPTER 4 EMPIRES OF WESTERN SUDAN

Objectives

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:

- identify the areas referred to as Western Sudan;
- know the main stages in the rise and fall of these empires;
- explain the nature of the economy and politics of Ghana, Mali and Songhay empires;
- identify important rulers of Ghana, Mali and Songhay and discuss their main achievements.

Introduction

Western sudanic empires are the empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhay which emerged in the savannah region of West Africa, close to the river Niger. They were important empires who had a centralized administration and strong economy. The states are referred to as successor state because Mali emerged in the same area replacing Ghana and Songhai replacing Mali;

4.1 Geography of the Western Sudan

The Western Sudan empires were the empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhay which emerged in the savannah region stretching from Atlantic Ocean to West of Hausaland, close to the River Niger in West Africa. They emerged in an area of abundant rainfall and soil fertility which supported the production of wheat, millet and rice. Also, the location of these empires close to the river led to the development of fishing as an important activity in the lives of the people. The location of these empires made them to serve as middlemen between the people of the forest and those of North Africa in terms of trading activities.

4.2 Ghana Empire

Ghana is one of the earliest states that emerged in West Africa. Ghana was formed by Soninke people and the area came to be referred to as Ghana in the 9th century. Reference was made to the area by Arab geographers such as al-Fazari who referred to the area as “land of gold”.

The Ghana kingdom was located along the Rivers Senegal and Niger. Kaya Maghan was said to have founded the capital of Ghana at Humbi Saleh. He was said to have overthrown an existing dynasty of the Barber and in its place, he established a Soninke dynasty.

By 1000AD, Ghana was a powerful state which extended to Bambuk region to the south, on the North there was the Barber town of Audoghurst, on the West was River Senegal and East, the River Niger. Ghana expanded because of its policy of conquering other areas.

Political Organisation of Ghana

Ghana developed a form of central administrative control. The king was the head of government and was assisted by cabinet of ministers who formulated state policies. This is followed by the civil servants who were assigned to supervising the state affairs such as agriculture and taxation.

By 1067, due to the fact that the people of Ghana were traditional worshippers, the king appointed Muslims to certain positions due to their level of education. Such positions were the prime ministers, vizier, court interpreter and state treasurer.

The empire was further divided into provinces for administrative convenience. In the area inhabited by Soninke people, Soninke governors were appointed by the central government to rule. The governors were in charge of collection of taxes and maintenance of law and order.

On the other hand, areas inhabited by non-Soninke were made to be ruled by their local rulers but on the condition that the sons of the conquered Kings lived in the royal court as a sign of loyalty. The provinces were further divided into districts. Tributes were paid by the vassal states in exchange for the provision of security against external attack.

Militarily, Ghana had the capacity of recruiting thousands of warriors as the need arises. The emperor had cavalry forces due to importation of horse from North Africa. There was no standing army in Ghana but the emperor could mobilise according to al-Bakni 200,000 warriors at the time of need. Also, Ghana had the advantage of using some military equipment such as spears, swords which gave them advantages over their neighbours.

The Economy of Ghana

Gold was found in abundance in Ghana; it was mined in the Wangara area located south of the area. Gold became the major article of trade between Ghana and North Africa. Other articles of trade taken to North Africa were slaves, ivory, ostrich feathers, gum and honey. From North Africa, goods such as salt, copper, brocade and horses were brought to Ghana. Thus, these goods and ideas were exchanged in the Trans-Saharan trade which led to contacts between Ghana, the Barbers and the Arabs.

Agriculture played an important role in the economy of Ghana as millet and wheat were the major produce used to support the large population.

In the industrial sector, they developed iron smithing which was important in the production of arrows, hoes and cutlass. Cloth manufacture using hands looms was important in Ghana. Textiles were produced for local use and the surplus served as articles of trade.

It should be noted that trade was an important source of revenue to the empire through the custom duties that were imposed on goods coming into the kingdom. Taxes also formed important source of revenue to the state. Thus, the revenue was used to maintain the large administration of the state.

Decline and Collapse of Ghana

Ghana suffered series of attack which affected the empire. The Sanhadja Barber attacked Ghana in a bid to conquer Audugust that was captured from them in 990AD. This was followed by al-moravid attacks on Ghana in 1054 under their leader, Abu bekr. The al-moravid conqured Audugust as well as Kumbi Saleh in 1076. The al-moravid attack had negative impacts on Ghana as it led to the collapse of the flourishing trade and agriculture. This made the empire to show signs of decline.

Also, the empire at that stage experienced revolt, as the people of Tekrur, Kaniaga and others became independent of Ghana control. Ghana could not fight the revolts because of shortage of revenue. This affected its ability to raise large number of soldiers to control the revolts.

Finally in 1203, a powerful army headed by Samanguru, attacked and destroyed Kumbi Saleh and the Soninke people were conquered. This made merchants to leave Ghana to Walata, Hausaland and other places in the Sudan. In 1235, Samanguru was defeated by Sundiata who merged Ghana with Kangaba that later formed Mali.

The al-moravid conquest of Ghana led to the conversion of Soninke people to Islam. There was disruption of Trans-Saharan trade and the trade only recovered with the rise of Mali and Timbuktu.

4.3 Mali Empire

The empire emerged from the unification of Kangaba and Ghana by Sundiata. Mali was inhabited by Malinke people. He transferred the capital from Jeriba to Niani near Bamoko, but Arab travelers called the place Mali; thus, the empire came to be known as Mali. Mali from the beginning became a Muslim state, as Islam was practised by both the rulers and the subjects. The rulers of Mali made it a large and prosperous empire through expansion and conquest of other areas.

Mali empire had a strong army used for defence and expansion of the kingdom. According to al-Barki, Mali under Mansa Musa had 10,000 horsemen and 90,000 infantry soldiers.

Political Organisation of Mali

The government was headed by the emperor called Mansa, who was the executive head of government. The king was assisted by council of ministers who were Muslim scholars. The empire was divided into province headed by governors. The governors were usually local rulers appointed who were loyal to the king. Any province not loyal to the emperor, military governors was appointed to such areas by the emperor. The governor controlled revolts and ensured that the people obey law and order.

The emperor also appointed governors to Timbuktu and Jenne which were important commercial centres. The main functions of all the governors were maintenance of law and order and collection of tribute which was taken to the emperor. The governors were expected to perform their duties and failure to do so may lead to dismissal and new ones appointed to such positions. This helped in making the administration of the areas efficient.

There was the presence of court of laws and appeal courts in the empire. The courts were established in all parts of the empire and the people could make an appeal to the ruler whenever they had a complaint.

The Economy of Mali

Agriculture was important in Mali. Grain production such as wheat, millet and rice supported the population of the area. Gold remained an important source of revenue to the state as it was produced in Walata. Salt, glass wares, spices and brocade were brought from North Africa while Gold was exported to North Africa.

Trade in gold was an important source of revenue to the state. The state also levied taxes on goods coming in, as well as taxes on grains and livestock kept by the peasants. Participation in Trans-Saharan trade made the merchants wealthy and they lived in good buildings. The rulers of Mali also lived in affluence due to good source of revenue. The rulers of Mali built diplomatic relations in North Africa such as Egypt and Morocco.

Achievement of Mali Rulers

Sundiata Keita (1250 – 1255)

He regained the independence of the Malinke people from Kangaba. He was renowned for the conversion of small Malinke area of Kangaba to a big empire. He conquered old Ghana and incorporated it into the kingdom. He divided the kingdom into provinces.

He maintained trade relations and controlled the Trans-Saharan trade. He gained control of the gold producing areas of Wangara Bumbuk and Bodu. Mali became the main supplier of gold in the trade. Under him, the power and wealth of Mali superceded that of Ghana.

Mansa Kankan Musa (1312 – 1337)

He was popularly called Mansa Musa. He continued with the achievements of Sundiata. He controlled Songhay and conquered trading centres of Timbuktu and Jenen which increased the source of revenue to the state. He restored peace and security in the empire and made administration efficient by establishing central provincial administration. He rewarded officials with gifts and other rewards to make them loyal subjects. He established national honour for outstanding services.

He maintained justice throughout the kingdom. He maintained a standing army consisting of 100,000 soldiers. He maintained the Trans-Saharan trade as well as the gold trade which enabled him to generate wealth.

He encouraged scholars to settle in the area and encouraged the teaching of Islam. He made a pilgrimage to Mecca and brought back scholars who later established the Sankore University.

Mansa Musa advertised the empire to the world and the area came to be known by Arabs and Europeans. The empire became weak due to succession disputes and weak rulers on the throne in the

14th century and this made the Tuaregs captured Walata in 1433 and Mossi people occupied Timbuktu. By 1468, Sonni Ali of Songhai started conquering parts of Mali, and by 1670 the empire had collapsed.

Songhai Empire

Songhai empire emerged in lower bend of the Niger. The area was inhabited by the Sorko people who were fishermen and the Gabibi people who lived by farming and hunting. In the 7th century, the Sorko established their control over the Gabibi which led to the formation of Songhay with its capital at Kukai. In the 8th century, a Barber group called Lemtuna headed by their ruler called Za established the Za dynasty in Songhai.

In 1010, Za Kossi was converted to Islam along with other officials of the kingdom. Za Kossi moved the capital from Kukia to Gao which was a commercial centre that linked caravan routes of the Sudan with North African markets of Tadmekket and Takedda. The empire grew strong in the 14th century. Also in the 14th century, the Za title came to an end and Sonni came to be associated with the dynasty of Songhai.

Political Organisation of Songhai

With the emergence of Sonni dynasty, the political system was as follows:

The Sonni was the head of government. The king was assisted by council of ministers such as minister of finance and taxation, minister of justice, minister of defence, Naval officer and immigration officers. Under Sonni Ali, the empire was divided into provinces headed by governors. Provinces that were loyal to the emperor were allowed to be ruled by local rulers while areas that showed sign of resistance were governed by governors.

During the reign of Ashia Mohammed, he divided the empire into four regions – Kurmina, Bala, Banga and Dendi; each administered by a regional governor from the royal family. The regions were further divided into provinces. Far provinces such as Kano and Kastina paid tribute to the emperor. The empire established a standing army which it used in defence and expansion of the kingdom.

Economy of Songhai

Agricultural production was significant in Songhai. Production of food crops and fish was encouraged. Different regions were encouraged to specialise in the production of certain goods. For example, more regions produced grains while some produced fish. Estates were built by slaves and were supervised by officials called Fanfa. This system helped in the production of food to meet the needs of the people.

Industry and craft were also important. Some regions produced farming implements such as hoes and cutlass and war implements such as arrows and spears, while other areas produced gold, mining, production of salt and copper. The sales of the industrial products provided revenue for the central government.

Trade was very important between Songhai and North Africa, whereby gold, slaves, salt were exported while horses were imported. During the reign of Askia Mohammed, he introduced weight and measure which were important in trade. Trade was established between Songhai and the coast from where they received European goods such as textiles and guns.

The government also received revenue from vassal states which enabled it to support the administration of the state.

Achievement of Rulers of Songhai

Sonni Ali (1464 – 1492)

He is credited with transforming the empire from a small kingdom to a large one. Sonni Ali is called Sonni Ali the Great.

He established a standing army consisting of horsemen and foot soldiers. He established peace in the kingdom and began to expand the kingdom. He conquered Timbuktu upon the invitation of its ruler. He also conquered Jenne, a centre of Islamic education and commerce. He occupied the Eastern half of Mali empire which offered control over the upper part of the Niger.

Sonni Ali was hostile to Muslim scholars and he did not adhere strictly to Islamic practices. He mixed Islam with traditional religion. At the time of his rule, the empire stretched from Kebbi to the East, Jennu to the West, Timbuktu to the North and borders of Mossi kingdom to the South. It was indeed a big kingdom. He died by drowning in 1492 after a successful campaign in Gurma.

Askia Mohammed (1493 – 1528)

He continued with the consolidation of the kingdom as started by Sonni Ali. He established the Askia dynasty which ruled the empire until its collapse. He appointed Muslim scholars to important positions in the kingdom. He performed pilgrimage in 1495 – 1497 where he was appointed as the caliph of the Sudan.

He established a standing army by maintaining horsemen and foot soldiers. He defended the empire from external attack and also began the expansion of the kingdom. In 1498, he fought the Mossi of Yatenga, but he was unable to conquer them, however, he weakened their military strength. In 1513, he conquered Hausa states such as: Gobir, Zaria, Kastina and Kano.

He appointed ministers to various positions, such as finance and taxation, justice, defence and also divided the empire into four regions, namely; Kurmina, Bala, Banga and Dendi. The regions were further divided into provinces. This administrative set up helped in the growth and development of the kingdom.

Justice was done based on Islamic law. Judges called Kadis were appointed to interpret the law. Askia Mohammed was a devout Muslim and served as an example to his subjects. He encouraged Islamic education by building koranic schools; about a hundred of such schools were built in Timbuktu. Sankore University emerged in Timbuktu and subjects taught were Islamic law, Grammar, Astronomy, History and Geography. Scholars came to the university from all over the world. Books from North Africa were valued due to the importance of learning.

He encouraged farming and building of industries to boost production. He made regions to specialize in certain products which made food abundant. He introduced weight and balances of gold and other goods. He introduced credit system to encourage trade. The rule of Askia Mohammed ended in 1528 when he was deposed by his son Musa.

Summary

- Western Sudan empires were Ghana, Mali and Songhai which stretched from Atlantic Ocean to the West of Hausaland.
- Ghana emerged around rivers Senegal and Niger with its capital Kumbi Saleh.
- By 1000AD, Ghana became a powerful state trading with North Africa and gold was the major item of trade.
- Ghana was inhabited by Soninke people and it was divided into provinces for administrative convenience, Ghana was referred to as “the land of gold”.
- The economy of Ghana was based on trade and agriculture.
- Mali emerged following the unification of Kangaba and Ghana.
- The emperor of Mali is called Mansa and was assisted by Council of Ministers. Provincial governors were appointed to the various provinces.
- The economy of Mali was based on agriculture, industry and trade in gold.
- Gold became a measure source of revenue and it was used to maintain the state administration.
- Sundiata and Mansa Musa were great rulers of Mali who developed the economy and political systems, as well as expanded the frontiers of the kingdom.
- Songhai emerged in the lower bend of the Niger. The area was inhabited by Sorko and Gabibi people.
- Létnuna Barbers established the Za dynasty in the area in the 8th century.
- The capital of Songhai was moved from Kukia to Gao which was a commercial centre.
- In the 14th century, the Za dynasty ended and Sonni dynasty came into power.
- Songhai empire was divided into four regions which were further divided into provinces for easy administration.
- Songhai rulers conquered Hausa states such as Kebbi, Kastina, Kano and Daura.

- Great rulers of Songhai were Sonni Ali and Askia Mohammed.

Objective Questions

1. The following are Western Sudan empires except _____.
 - A. Benin empire
 - B. Ghana empire
 - C. Mali empire
 - D. Songhai empire
2. Ghana empire had its capital at _____.
 - A. Kumbi saleh
 - B. Oyo
 - C. Kano
 - D. Kastina
3. Ghana empire was inhabited by the _____ people.
 - A. Hausa
 - B. Fulani
 - C. Soninke
 - D. Yoruba
4. _____ was referred to as land of gold.
 - A. Ghana empire
 - B. Hausa state
 - C. Mali empire
 - D. Songhai empire
5. Mali emerged from the unification of Kangaba with _____.
 - A. Mali
 - B. Ghana
 - C. Songhai
 - D. Hausaland
6. Mansa Musa was a ruler of _____.
 - A. Oyo empire
 - B. Benin empire
 - C. Mali empire
 - D. Ghana empire
7. Songhai empire emerged in the lower bend of the _____.
 - A. Benue River
 - B. Niger River
 - C. Senegambia River

- D. Atlantic Ocean
8. _____ rulers conquered Kano, Kastina and Kebbi.
- A. Ghana
 - B. Benin
 - C. Songhai
 - D. Mossi
9. Askia Mohammed promoted Islamic learning and scholarship in _____.
- A. Warri
 - B. Calabar
 - C. Songhai empire
 - D. Mossi states
10. _____ advertised Mali on the world map.
- A. Mansa Sulaiman
 - B. Mansa Musa
 - C. Mansa Idris
 - D. Mansa Umar

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the economy of Ghana empire.
2. Examine the political system of Mali.
3. Discuss the achievement of two rulers of Mali.
4. Discuss the nature of the economy of Songhai empire.
5. Examine the growth and development of Ghana empire