

THE SONGHAI EMPIRE

The Songhai Empire flourished from 1350 to 1591 AD. Geographically, the Songhai Empire was expansive, and encompassed two thirds of West Africa and included present day Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger. The city of Timbuktu was the epicenter of global trade routes following the Niger and Senegal Rivers, and was described as “where the camel met the canoe.”. Timbuktu was the meeting point for the Wangare, Fulani, Tuareg and Arab peoples. Gold was the most important commodity, providing half the world’s supply of gold. and was transported from the Gold Coast in the south, while salt was transported from Taghaza by camels from the north. The city of Kano was renowned for the leather goods, to include pillowcases, saddles, boots, slippers and bookcases.



Aerial View of the Niger River and Gao City

The great medieval historian Ibn Khaldun noted that there could be up to 12,000 camels moving goods on a single trade road, in one year. Barges on the Niger river could carry between 3 to 50 persons. Royal barges carried up to 80 persons. It has been documented that in some instances, families slept, cooked and ate on boats with cabins.

The Songhai people originally began as subjects of the great Mali Empire, but broke-away to form a smaller kingdom. Eventually, the Songhai grew in prominence, influence, and absorbed the parent Mali Empire territory. In 1468 AD, King Sunni Ali (aka Sonni Ali Ber)



Modern-market on Niger River
..where camel met canoe



Camel Caravan, Mali

expanded Songhai Territory by abandoning small, sporadic raids against the Mali Empire, and adopted a more sustained campaign of permanent territorial expansion. The Songhai were able to expand with an army equipped with armored cavalry and the only naval fleet in North Africa, which was deployed on the Niger River, The 1656 AD Timbuktu chronicle, the Tarikh al-Sudan noted: "He reigned for 28 years, waged 32 wars of which he won every one, always the conqueror, never the conquered.

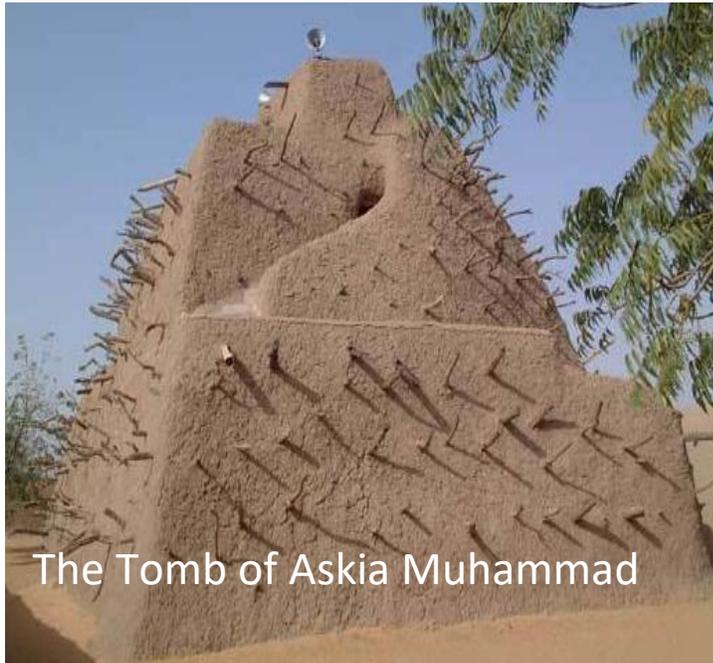
At its peak, the Timbuktu City population reached 100,000. The Timbuktu University had a population of 25,000. The medieval historian Leo Africanus wrote about Timbuktu in 1526, "In Timbuktu, there are numerous judges, PhDs and clerics, all receiving good salaries from the king. He pays great respect to men of learning. There is a big demand for books imported from North Africa. More profit is made from the book trade than any other line of business"

Today, Malian families and institutions retain these old books as family heirlooms. The following cities report the following number of manuscripts: 1) 3,550 in the cities of Chinguetti and Ouadane, 6,000 in Walata, and 700,000 in Timbuktu. It is estimated that one quarter of these books are about, history, law, ethics, biographies, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, medicine and geography.



The Great Mosque of Djenne

The Great Mosque of Djenne was built in the “Western Sudanic” style, and is the largest clay building on earth, began as a palace, and was later converted into a mosque. It is made of sun-baked bricks, with wooden buttresses to provide strength, and is covered by plaster. The homes in Djenne have survived since the 1500s, from the Songhai period. There are some that have two stories with 5 to 6 rooms. One of the upstairs rooms has a salanga or toilet.



Askia Muhammad was king credited for not only expanding the Songhai Empire, but the faith of Islam inside of its borders. The Tomb of Askia Mohammad I (r. 1494-1528 CE) located in the city of Gao. The complex includes a pyramid shaped tomb, two flat-roofed mosque buildings, the mosque cemetery, and the open-air assembly ground.

In December 1988, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN's cultural body, granted world heritage status to Timbuktu in recognition of its importance to world history. The Timbuktu

Educational Foundation is the legal custodian of the manuscripts, and is charged to restore, preserve, publish and protect the 700,000 manuscripts.

During the decline in 1591, the Songhai Empire experienced civil wars, and was later attacked and absorbed into the Morocco Empire. While the 30,000 strong Songhai army outnumbered the Moroccan force of 4,000 men, there was a weapons mismatch, i.e., muskets vs. spears/arrows. As a result, Morocco won the war. The Songhai Empire was the last of the great empires that dominated West Africa.

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