

Songhai

The third great empire in West Africa was Songhai [SAWNG-hy], which rose in the east as Mali declined. Like Ghana before it, Mali was an amalgam of conquered peoples. When they rebelled, the central government did not have the forces to reconquer them. Over time, Mali slowly disintegrated, and the empire of Songhai became the single most powerful political entity in West Africa.

Askia Muhammad

The first great leader of Songhai was Sonni Ali, who ruled from 1461 to 1492. He pulled together various regions and groups of people along the Middle Niger to create an empire even larger than Mali. In 1493, Askia Muhammad, one of Ali's generals, ousted Ali's son and seized power.

Askia Muhammad ruled until 1528. He enlarged the empire even more. His armies roamed all the way to the Atlantic Ocean in the west and moved east into what are today Niger and Nigeria. A devout Muslim, Askia Muhammad introduced reforms that incorporated Islamic policies. For example, he instituted a legal system based on Islamic principles and appointed Islamic judges to administer the laws. He set out to convert his subjects to Islam and encouraged the building of mosques and the teaching of the Qur'an. Timbuktu once again became a center of Islamic learning and cultural development. Askia Muhammad's pilgrimage to Mecca rivaled the splendor of Mansa Musa's.

In the 36th year of his reign, Askia Muhammad was deposed by one of his sons, who in turn was ousted within three years. Continuing rivalry over the throne weakened the empire. The final blow was a 28-year invasion and occupation by Moroccans. Although the Moroccans never succeeded in subduing the empire, little was left of it when the Moroccans finally withdrew.