Societies of West Africa

MAIN IDEA
The peoples of West Africa developed sophisticated kingdoms, trade networks, and artistic achievements.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW
It was from this region that many Africans were brought to the Americas.

TERMS & NAMES
Ghana
Muslims
Islam
Mali
Songhai
Hausa
Yoruba
Benin

ONE AFRICAN’S STORY
King Tenkaminen (TEHN•kah•MEE•nehn) of the West African empire of Ghana was a powerful ruler. He grew rich by taxing gold traders who traveled through his land. In 1067, a geographer wrote a description of the royal court.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST
The king adorns himself . . . wearing necklaces round his neck and bracelets on his forearms. . . . Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold.

al-Bakri, quoted in The Horizon History of Africa

West Africa was the homeland of many of the enslaved Africans who were brought to the Americas after 1500. You will read about West Africa in this section.

African Geography and World Trade
Africa is the world’s second largest continent after Asia. (See the map on page 40.) Although Africa has a variety of land forms and climates, almost three quarters of it lies within the tropics. The equator runs east-west across the center of Africa. Dense rain forests stretch along the equator in central and western Africa. North and south of the rain forests are broad savannas, which are grassy plains with thorny bushes and scattered trees. Beyond the savanna in the North lies the Sahara, the world’s largest desert. Beyond the savanna in the South lies the smaller Kalahari Desert.

By A.D. 1500, coastal ports had linked Africa with the rest of the world for many centuries. Ships from ports on the Mediterranean and the Red Sea carried goods to Arabia and Persia. On Africa’s east coast, city-states carried on a brisk trade with ports across the Indian Ocean.
Like other parts of Africa, West Africa has rain forest along the equator and savanna to the north. The Niger River arcs across those grasslands and forests and then empties into the Atlantic Ocean. Along its northern edge, West Africa borders the Sahara.

**Ghana Grows Wealthy**

On a map, the Sahara appears to be a barrier between West Africa and the ports on the Mediterranean coast. But by A.D. 500, camel caravans led by eager merchants made regular journeys across the great desert. This connected West Africa to the wider world.

Ghana became the first West African kingdom to grow rich through trade. From the 700s to the mid-1000s, Ghana prospered by controlling the busy trade in gold and salt. Located on the southern edge of the Sahara, Ghana became a marketplace for traders going north and south in search of salt and gold. (Ancient Ghana was northwest of modern Ghana.) Salt was important because it helps the human body retain water in hot weather. Traders carried salt from the Saharan salt mines in the north. In Ghana’s markets, they met other traders offering gold from the forests of West Africa.

Ghana’s king benefited from this trade. He imposed taxes on all gold and salt passing through his kingdom. The taxes had to be paid in gold. The king also claimed all gold nuggets found in his kingdom. Ghana’s king used the resulting wealth to pay for an army and build an empire.

**Background**

The camel is used in the desert because it can travel up to 10 days without water.

**Reading History**

A. Analyzing Causes

Why did the king want taxes to be paid in gold and all gold nuggets to be given to him?

**GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Maps**

1. **Place** Which of the three West African empires occupied the largest amount of territory?
2. **Movement** Describe the route that you would take from the port city of Tunis to the trade city of Timbuktu.
Islam Enters Ghana

Many of the traders who came to Ghana from North Africa were Muslims. Muslims are followers of the religion of Islam. Founded by the prophet Muhammad in the 600s, Islam teaches that there is one God, named Allah. Muslims must perform such duties as praying five times a day and making a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Arabia. Muslim traders crossing the Sahara brought Islam from North Africa to West Africa. Ghana’s rulers allowed those Muslims to build mosques, or houses of worship, in Ghana’s capital, Kumbi Saleh. In time, Ghana’s rulers employed Muslims as advisers.

The Muslim empires of North Africa wanted to convert Ghana’s people to Islam and to control Ghana’s gold trade. In 1076, a Muslim army conquered Kumbi Saleh. This lessened Ghana’s power. A number of local leaders took advantage of Ghana’s weakness. They built up their own small states on the edges of the once mighty empire. Ghana never regained its former strength.

Over the next several centuries, more and more West Africans converted to Islam. In fact, many of the enslaved Africans who were brought to the Americas were Muslims.

Mali Replaces Ghana

By the 1200s, another West African kingdom had taken over most of Ghana’s territory. This kingdom, called Mali, became West Africa’s most powerful state. Its wealth also came from control of the gold-salt trade. But because it was located farther south than Ghana, Mali was better able to control the trade on the upper Niger River. (Ancient Mali stretched farther west than modern Mali and not as far north.)

Mali’s first great ruler, Sundiata (sun•JAHT•ah), reigned from about 1230 to 1255. He came to power by crushing a cruel, unpopular leader. Sundiata’s armies conquered many important trading cities. This made Mali’s hold on trade stronger and made Mali more prosperous. Sundiata was a Muslim, but he did not force his people to accept Islam. Most of the people of Mali retained their traditional African beliefs.

Mali’s other great leader was Mansa Musa (MAHN•sah moo•SAH), who was a devout Muslim. Mansa Musa came to the throne in 1312. Under his leadership, the empire became one of the largest in the world. Mansa Musa is best remembered for making the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 and 1325. On his way to Mecca, he stopped in Cairo, Egypt. According to some stories, Mansa Musa entered the city leading a huge caravan that included 500 servants who waved staffs decorated with gold. Each of the 80 camels in his caravan struggled under the weight of a 300-pound sack of gold. The legend of Mali’s wealth spread...
all the way to Europe. This was one reason that Europeans began to trade with Africa about 150 years later.

On his return to Mali, Mansa Musa brought back many Muslim scholars, artists, and architects. They helped spread Islamic culture and learning throughout the empire. The city of Timbuktu (TIHM•buhk•TOO) in eastern Mali became a leading center of trade and Islamic learning. After Mansa Musa’s death in 1337, Mali slowly grew weaker.

The Empire of Songhai

As Mali’s power decreased, the Songhai (SAWNG•HY) people living at the Great Bend in the Niger River broke away from its control. In 1464, under the leader Sunni Ali, they began their own empire. Sunni Ali was a Muslim, but he also practiced the traditional Songhai religion.

Under Sunni Ali, the Songhai captured the great city of Timbuktu. Then they put the important trading city of Djenné (jeh•NAY) under siege and captured it after seven years. In addition to conquering territory, Sunni Ali set up an organized system of government.

After Sunni Ali died in 1492, conflicts arose. Some Muslims began a rebellion because they wanted Islam to be the only religion of Songhai. The leader of the revolt was Askia Muhammad, a devoted Muslim.

Askia Muhammad won his fight and became Songhai’s second great ruler. For 35 years, he ably governed the empire. He chose capable officials who made the government run smoothly. He also expanded trade and set up an efficient tax system. Askia Muhammad used his wealth to build mosques and support Muslim scholars.

After Askia Muhammad’s reign, several weak rulers succeeded him. Even when a strong ruler took the throne again, the empire faced problems. In spite of Songhai’s wealth and learning, it lacked modern weapons. In 1591, a Moroccan fighting force from North Africa invaded Songhai with gunpowder and cannon. They easily defeated Songhai’s soldiers, who were defending their empire with swords and spears.

Other West African Kingdoms

As empires rose and fell in some parts of West Africa, small city-states arose in other parts of the region. The Hausa (HOW•suh) states emerged after A.D. 1000 in what is now northern Nigeria. Hausa city-states, such as Katsina and Kano, thrived on trade. Although the Hausa people shared a language, their city-states were independent of each other.

The Yoruba (YAWR•uh•buh) lived in the forests southwest of the Niger River. Ife and Oyo, the largest Yoruba states, had kings
who were considered to be partly divine. The Yoruba were mostly farmers, but they also had gifted artists, who carved wood and ivory and cast metal sculptures. Yoruba statues are still considered great art.

Another kingdom famous for its art was Benin. **Benin**, located in the delta of the Niger River, lay on main trade routes and prospered because of that. The capital, Benin City, was large and surrounded by thick, earthen walls. About 1600, a Dutch visitor compared Benin City to his home city of Amsterdam in Europe.

In the late 1400s, Europeans reached Benin. Portuguese ships arrived, and the Portuguese set up a trade center near Benin City. Benin traders sold the Portuguese pepper, ivory, and leopard skins in exchange for copper and guns. In time, the Portuguese and other Europeans also began to trade for enslaved Africans. The Europeans who came to West Africa were not seeking information about its rich history or culture. They wanted a supply of laborers to work on large farms, called plantations. Chapter 2 explains more about plantations and slavery.

Trade was just one reason Europeans were sailing far beyond their lands. Social changes were also spurring them to explore the world. Those changes are discussed in Section 4.