

THE EMPIRE OF SONGHAI

KEY CONCEPT FOCUS: This close reading will address the geography, economy, religions, government, and achievements of the Empire of Songhai.



Even while the empire of Mali was still thriving, Songhai started to grow from its capital city of Gao, competing in the very same trade markets as Mali. Even Mansa Musa noted the potential strength of Songhai, attacking and absorbing their small kingdom into Mali. However, when the Empire of Mali began to weaken after the death of Mansa Musa, the people of Songhai attacked, taking control of most of Mali by the mid 1400s CE. The empire of Songhai expanded even further east and west maintaining Gao as the capital trade city along the Niger River. The new country of Songhai became the largest country in Africa.

GOVERNMENT & ACHIEVEMENTS

In order to make the large Empire of Songhai easier to govern, it divided itself into five provinces. New leaders were put into places of authority in these provinces to insure that they would be loyal to the Songhai king. The king also established a professional army, the first in West Africa.

The empire of Songhai was ruled by *Sunni Ali*. He **unified**, or combined his country by encouraging his people to work together. This unity would seek fairness and **equity** among his people. He promoted peace by allowing local religions of *animism* and *ancestor worship* to exist in conjunction with Islam. In fact, he led though example by practicing local religions and Islam in his own life.

One of the greatest rulers of Songhai was *Askia the Great*. Under his leadership the power of Songhai grew even greater. It was during his reign that *Timbuktu* and



Askia the Great

Djenne became centers of learning once again. The universities of Songhai were known for their teachings in mathematics, grammar, law, science, and medicine.

RELIGION

The empire of Songhai was **predominantly** (controlling influence) Muslim. However, as mentioned before under Sunni Ali's leadership, to maintain peace and stability, all religions were **tolerated** and accepted. Just like Mansa Musa of Ghana, *Askia the Great* made a **pilgrimage**, or trip to Mecca as was **mandated**, directed by the fifth pillar of Islam. As before, frequent pilgrimages from Muslims of Mali further promoted trade between Asia and West Africa. In addition, Arabic was widely spoken in West Africa, which meant books and knowledge could be shared throughout Africa and East Asia.

A TRADE BASED ECONOMY

Just like the earlier kingdoms of this region, Songhai had control of both gold and salt mines. Songhai encouraged trading with Muslims, such as the Berbers of the north. Great marketplaces thrived in major cities, where kola nuts, gold, ivory, slaves, spices, palm oil and precious woods were traded in exchange for salt, cloth, arms, horses, and copper. Just as in Ghana and Mali, the Niger River proved to be a major resource for the transportation of goods.

DECLINE

The empire of Songhai would only last about 150 years. It would fall to the advancement of Moroccan troops. The Moroccans desired to claim the salt mines controlled by Songhai. These invaders would have a new advantage: guns.

