

FULL TEXT

CHAPTER 12 - Early Societies in West Africa

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Text: HISTORY ALIVE! The Medieval World

12.1 Introduction

In this unit, you will learn about West African cultures between about 500 and 1600 C.E. During this period, three kingdoms arose in West Africa: Ghana, Songhai, and Mali. In this chapter, you will explore how these kingdoms grew and developed.

People have lived in West Africa for hundreds of thousands of years. For most of this time, historians do not have written records to study. Muslim scholars first began writing about the kingdom of Ghana in the 800s. By then, Ghana was perhaps 300 years old, and possibly much older. How did the first kingdoms come to be? Why did they develop where they did?

To answer questions like these, historians and archeologists study many kinds of clues. For example, they look closely at geography. Natural features, such as rivers and vegetation, help explain where people chose to settle and what kind of life they created for themselves. Scholars also try to understand evidence from ancient settlements. How were villages and towns laid out? What can this tell us about life there?

Items left by earlier cultures also provide helpful clues about the past. Iron farming tools, for example, show that agricultural methods improved in West Africa. Scholars have worked to understand how more **efficient** farming affected the growth of towns and cities. Gradually, scholars have pieced together a picture of how complex societies developed in West Africa.

In this chapter, you will explore current thinking about the origins of West African kingdoms. You will discover how early family-based communities developed into villages and how some villages grew into towns and cities. You will see how some cities became great kingdoms.

12.2 Geography and Trade

Geography offers many clues about why people settle where they do and how they live. It also helps to explain patterns of trade. As you will see throughout this chapter, trade played a key role in the growth of West African societies. Let's take a look at the geography of West Africa and its influence on trade.

Geography In the north, West Africa begins in the **Sahara**. To the west and south, the region is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean; and to the east, by the mountains of the present-day country of Cameroon. West Africa includes varied vegetation zones of desert, semidesert, savanna, and forest.

The Sahara spreads across approximately 3.5 million square miles in North Africa and the northern part of West Africa. Sand dunes cover one-quarter of the Sahara, but this desert also has bare, rocky plains, and even mountains. The Sahara is very dry except for some scattered oases, or water sources with some vegetation. As you can imagine, the Sahara was not a suitable place for large settlements.



As they did in the past, people still use canoes to travel along the Niger River.

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South of the Sahara is a zone of semidesert called the **Sahel**. The Sahel is not as dry as the Sahara. It has enough water for short grasses and some small bushes and trees to survive.

The southern part of the Sahel merges into the **savanna**, an area of tall grasses and scattered trees. The savanna has a long rainy season. Because of the rain, grains such as millet, sorghum, and rice can be grown there. Grasses provide food for cattle, camels, goats, and sheep. Rivers, such as the long **Niger River**, help make nearby land fertile and also provide fish for eating.

The Niger River extends into the forest zone in the southern part of West Africa. This zone is wetter than the savanna. Its northern part is a woodland forest of trees and shrubs. Oil palms, yams, and kola trees grow here. The southern part of the zone is lush rainforest, where rain falls year-round. In the rainforest, tall trees—such as mahogany and teak—grow above swamps and lagoons.

Trade The geography of West Africa influenced the patterns of trade that developed there. Different resources are found in each of the vegetation zones. As a result, people living in different zones had to trade to get items they could not provide for themselves. For example, people on the savanna may have traded grains for yams or mahogany from forest dwellers.

Several major rivers served as trading routes in West Africa. The Niger is the region's longest river. It became a kind of trading highway. People in ancient times traveled the Niger and other rivers by canoe to trade goods. Some traders also crossed the Sahara from North Africa, but most early trade was among West African settlements.

12.3 Early Communities and Villages

By about 4000 B.C.E., some people had settled to farm south of the Sahara. The earliest farming communities were made up of extended families. An extended family includes close relatives, such as grandparents, as well as aunts, uncles, and their children.

An extended-family community might have had about fifteen to twenty members. Each community produced most of the things it needed. Family members worked together to clear the fields, plant seeds, and harvest crops. These small communities traded with one another for additional goods. Very likely, one of the male elders made decisions for the family community.

Over time, family-based communities joined together to form villages. A village might contain one- to two-hundred people. The village leader was probably chosen for his wisdom and strength.

Extended families usually banded together in villages to get needed help. For example, people might need to work together to control a flooding river or to mine for iron or gold. They may also have united for protection. Archeologists have discovered ruins of high walls and gates at the ancient West African village of Dhar Tichitt, in the present-day country of Mauritania. These structures suggest that the villagers united to defend themselves from attacks by outsiders.

12.4 The Development of Towns and Cities

Some West African villages gradually developed into towns and cities. Ancient cities in West Africa were not as large as modern cities, but some had thousands of residents. Why did villages grow into cities in West Africa? Two important reasons were the growth of ironworking and the expansion of trade.

Ironworking and Trade The Hittites of present-day Turkey mastered ironworking as long ago as 1500 B.C.E. Gradually, knowledge of ironworking spread. Eventually, it reached West Africa, perhaps by way of traders who crossed the Sahara. However, some scholars think that ironworking developed independently among people in the northern part of West Africa.

By the 500s B.C.E., a people called the **Nok** were making iron tools. The Nok lived in what is now central Nigeria. Archeologists have found some **artifacts** of their culture, such as their iron tools and iron-smelting furnaces.

Smelting is the **process** of melting ore to extract iron or other metals. The Nok used enormous amounts of charcoal to fuel their iron-smelting furnaces. The red-hot iron was then hammered and bent into useful shapes by skilled workers called blacksmiths. Nok blacksmiths made axes, hoes, and weapons, such as spears.

The valuable craft of ironworking spread rapidly throughout West Africa. The ability to make tools out of iron brought major changes. With iron tools, farmers could clear land and grow crops more efficiently than with stone tools. The greater abundance of food supported larger villages, where more people were free to work at other trades, such as weaving, metalworking, and pottery making.

More and more, villages produced surplus food and hand-crafted goods. They could then trade their surpluses for goods they could not produce themselves.

As goods traveled across West Africa, villages located along rivers or other easily traveled routes became important trading sites. Villages that controlled the trade routes became market centers, and the inhabitants grew very rich by charging fees for trading activity. These villages also drew many people to work at new jobs, such as supervising trade, learning crafts, and helping to construct public buildings. Some of the villages grew into sizable towns and cities. Other large settlements grew up around natural resources, such as iron ore and good farmland.

The Ancient City of Jenne-jeno In 1977, archeologists began excavating the ancient West African city of **Jenne-jeno** (jen-NAH jen-OH). Built in the 3rd century B.C.E., Jenne-jeno existed for more than 1,600 years. Before it was rediscovered, historians thought that cities did not exist in West Africa until outsiders arrived and helped local people build them. The discovery of Jenne-jeno proved this theory wrong.



Iron tools made farming more efficient. This allowed people to devote more time to weaving, still practiced today, as well as other crafts.

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Jenne-jeno was built where the Niger River meets the Bani River. This was an ideal location for farming, fishing, and trade. The people of Jenne-jeno traded their surplus goods—such as catfish, fish oil, onions, and rice—for salt, iron ore, copper, and gold. The iron ore came from 50 miles away and the copper from 600 miles away.

Jenne-jeno grew into a busy city of about twenty thousand people. It was surrounded by a wall 10 feet wide and 13 feet high. The wall may have been built to give the city more status and to make it easier to control the comings and goings of traders.

The people of Jenne-jeno lived in circular houses. At first, they built the houses from bent poles and woven mats. Later, they used mud blocks.

The city's people worked at many crafts. Besides farmers and fishers, there were potters, metalsmiths, weavers, leatherworkers, bead makers, and ivory carvers.

The most respected people in Jenne-jeno were blacksmiths. The people of West Africa prized iron more than gold. They were amazed by blacksmiths' ability to make tools from iron. As in many other early cultures, early West Africans thought blacksmiths had supernatural (magical or godlike) powers. For this reason, blacksmiths had authority and many responsibilities. Blacksmiths acted as political leaders, judges, and doctors. Some were charged with **predicting** the future.

In recent years, scientists have studied the sites of other ancient cities in West Africa. They have found evidence of trade, craftsmanship, and great wealth.

12.5 The Rise of Kingdoms and Empires

Trade was a major factor in the rise of West African kingdoms. Ghana, Mali, and Songhai were all trading powers that ruled over large areas. Historians often refer to them as empires, as well as kingdoms.

How did these first kingdoms develop? The rulers of some trading cities in West Africa became wealthy by collecting taxes from the goods that were bought and sold. With their wealth, they could afford to raise large armies. These armies could conquer other trading areas nearby. Then the ruler could take over the trade of those areas and become even wealthier.

Rulers also collected **tribute** from the people they conquered. The payment of tribute was a sign that the conquered people accepted the king's authority. Tribute could also pay for the king's protection from outside attackers.

West African kings were both the political and the religious leaders of their kingdoms. People believed that they had special powers given to them by the gods. The kings performed religious ceremonies to please the gods.



These modern horsemen from West Africa are a reminder of the armies that rulers were able to raise with the wealth they received from trade.

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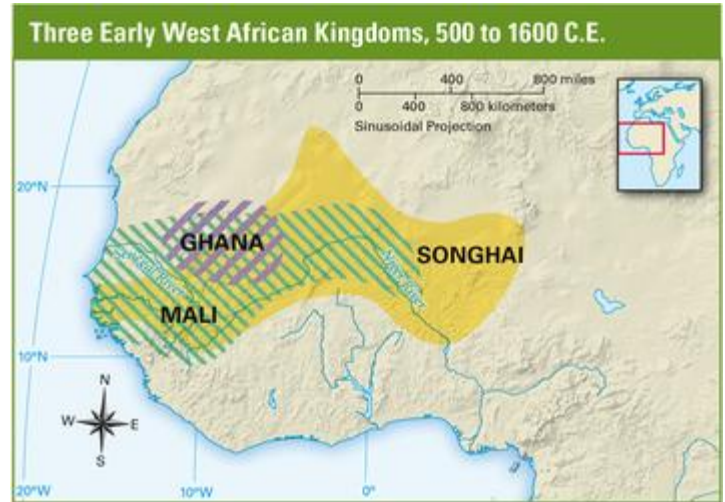
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As a king conquered more territory, the kingdom grew into an empire. Sometimes, a king sent a governor to rule a conquered area. Sometimes, he allowed conquered people to rule themselves.

Becoming part of a kingdom or an empire had disadvantages. One was the obligation to pay tribute. Another was that men had to serve in the king's army. But there were advantages, as well. Kings provided protection for the conquered territory. Armies made sure that trade routes were safe, and they kept out raiders and foreign armies. Wars between small cities ended. Kings collected luxury goods from their subjects and distributed them fairly throughout the kingdom. They also gave expensive presents to their governors.

The great kingdoms of West Africa did not rely only on local trade. By the time Ghana became an important power, trans-Saharan trade was bringing new wealth to West Africa from other regions, such as the present-day Middle East. Control of trade, particularly in West African gold, was also a key to the power of Mali. Songhai, too, relied on trade with distant lands.



Three major kingdoms—Ghana, Songhai, and Mali—arose in West Africa between 500 and 1600 C.E.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, you learned how kingdoms and empires grew out of early societies in West Africa.

Geography and Trade Geography was a major factor in the development of West African societies. Settled communities grew south of the Sahara, where the land permitted farming. Geography also influenced trading patterns. Communities traded with one another for items they could not produce locally. Rivers, such as the Niger, served as trade routes.

Early Communities Early societies in West Africa were family-based communities. Some of these communities joined together to form villages. Banding together in villages allowed people to take advantage of natural resources and to defend themselves from attack.

Towns and Cities Ironworking and trade helped some villages grow into sizable towns and cities. Iron tools allowed farmers to grow food more efficiently. As a result, more people could engage in other crafts. Villages traded their surplus goods for items they could not make themselves. Some villages became important trading sites and grew into cities. Others developed into large communities near important resources, such as iron ore or gold.

Kingdoms and Empires Trade brought some cities great wealth. The rulers of the wealthiest cities conquered neighboring areas, leading to the rise of kingdoms and empires. Rulers gained even more wealth through tribute, as well as by controlling trade