

GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ Why is West Africa significant for African-American history?
- ▶ How and why was Timbuktu a major center of trade and cultural exchange?
- ▶ What impact did Islam have on West Africa?
- ▶ What did the people of Central Africa have in common with those of the Guinea Coast?

KEY TERMS

- ▶ Berbers, p. 15
- ▶ forest region, p. 19

Section 2

West Africa

West African Civilizations

Like Africa as a whole, West Africa is physically, ethnically, and culturally diverse. Much of West Africa south of the Sahara Desert falls within the great savannah that spans the continent from east to west. West and south of the savannah, however, in Senegambia (modern Senegal and Gambia), stretching along the southwestern coast of West Africa, and in the lands located along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, there are extensive forests. These two environments—savannah and forest—were home to a great variety of cultures and languages. Patterns of settlement in the region ranged from isolated homesteads and hamlets through villages and towns to cities.

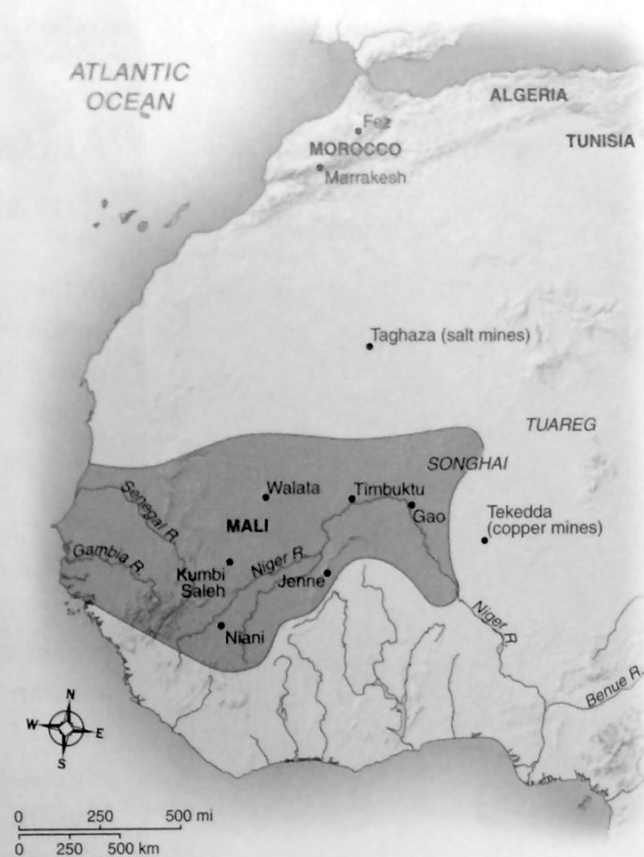
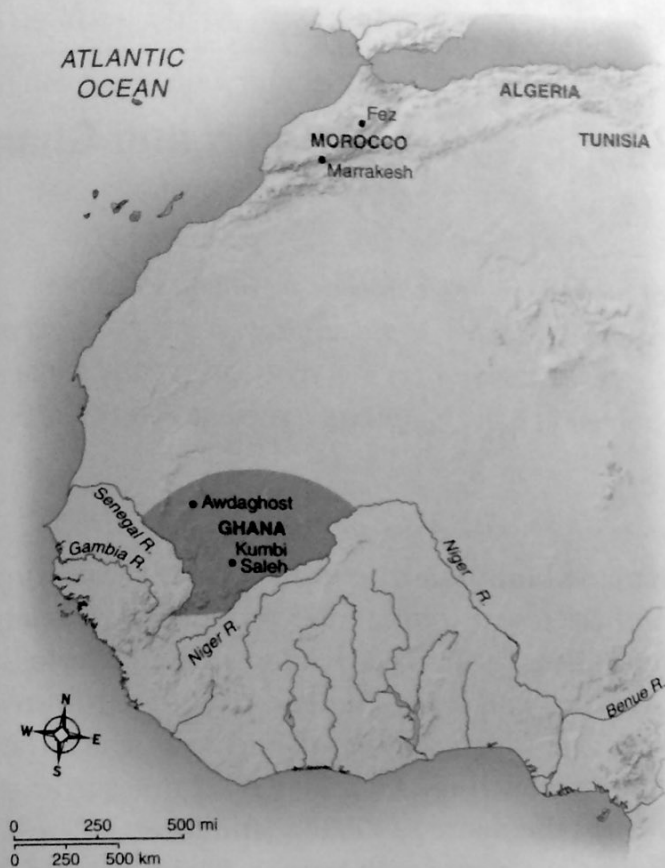
West Africans began cultivating crops and tending domesticated animals between 1000 BCE and 200 CE. Those who lived on the savannah usually adopted settled village life well before those who lived in the forests. The early farmers produced millet, rice, and sorghum while tending herds of cattle and goats. By 500 BCE, beginning with the Nok people of the forest region, some West Africans were producing iron tools and weapons.

From early times, the peoples of West Africa traded among themselves and with the peoples who lived across the Sahara Desert in North Africa. This extensive trade became an essential part of the region's economy and formed the basis for the three great western Sudanese empires that successively dominated the region from before 800 CE to the beginnings of the modern era.

Ancient Ghana

The first known kingdom in the western Sudan was Ghana (see Map 1-3). Founded by the Soninke people in the area north of the modern republic of Ghana, its origins are unclear. Its name comes from the Soninke word for king.

Ghana's kings were known in Europe and southwest Asia as the richest of monarchs, and the source of their wealth was trade. The key to this trade was the Asian camel, which was introduced into Africa during the first century CE. With its ability to endure long journeys on small amounts of water, the camel dramatically increased trade across the Sahara between the western Sudan and the coastal regions of North Africa.



MAP 1-3 The Empires of Ghana and Mali

The western Sudanese empires of Ghana and Mali helped shape West African culture.



What does this map suggest about the historical relationship between ancient Ghana and Mali?

Ghana traded in several commodities. From North Africa came silk, cotton, glass beads, horses, mirrors, dates, and, especially, salt, which was a scarce necessity in the torridly hot western Sudan. In return, Ghana exported pepper, slaves, and, especially, gold. The slaves were usually war captives, and the gold came from mines in the Wangara region to the southwest of Ghana. The Soninke did not mine the gold themselves, but the kings of Ghana grew rich by taxing it as it passed through their lands.

Before the fifth century CE, when the Roman Empire dominated the Mediterranean region, Roman merchants and **Berbers**—the indigenous people of western North Africa—were West Africa’s chief partners in the trans-Saharan trade. After the fifth century, as Roman power declined and Islam spread across North Africa, Arabs replaced the Romans. Arab merchants settled in Saleh, the Muslim part of Kumbi Saleh, Ghana’s capital. This was an impressive city, with stone houses and tombs, and as many as twenty thousand people. Visitors remarked the splendor of Kumbi Saleh’s royal court. Some Soninke converted to Islam. Moslems dominated the royal bureaucracy and in the process introduced Arabic writing to the region.

A combination of commercial and religious rivalries finally destroyed Ghana during the twelfth century. The Almorvids, who were Islamic Berbers, had been Ghana’s principal competitors for control of the trans-Saharan trade. In 992 Ghana’s army captured Awdaghost, the Almorvid trade center northwest of Kumbi Saleh. Driven as much by

Al Bakri Describes Kumbi Saleh and Ghana's Royal Court

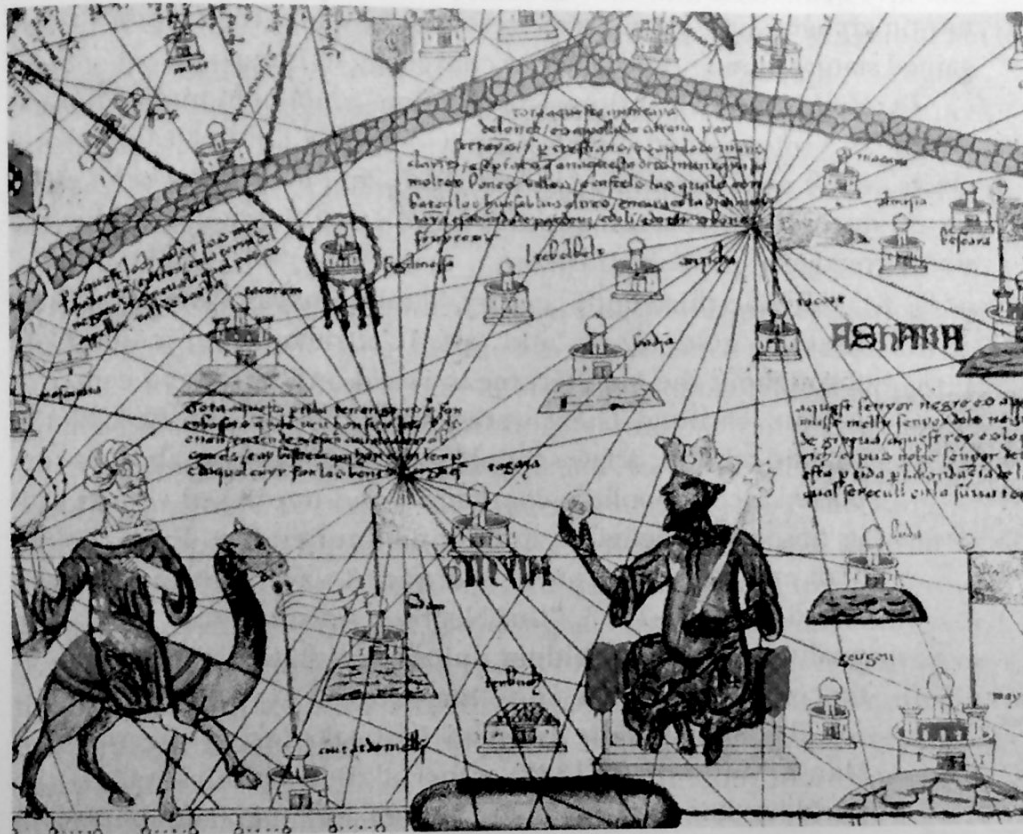
Nothing remains of the documents compiled by Ghana's Islamic bureaucracy. As a result, accounts of the civilization are all based on the testimony of Arab or Berber visitors. In this passage, written in the eleventh century, Arab geographer Al Bakri describes the great wealth and power of the king of Ghana.

The city of Ghana [Kumbi Saleh] consists of two towns lying in a plain. One of these towns is inhabited by Muslims. It is large and possesses twelve mosques. . . . There are imams and muezzins, and assistants as well as jurists and learned men. Around the town are wells of sweet water from which they drink and near which they grow vegetables. The town in which the king lives is six miles from the Muslim one, and bears the name Al Ghaba [the forest]. The land between the two towns is covered with houses. The houses of the inhabitants are of stone and acacia wood. The king has a palace and a number of dome-shaped dwellings, the whole surrounded by an enclosure like the defensive wall of a city. In the town where the king lives, and not far from the hall where he holds his court of justice, is a mosque where pray the Muslims who come on diplomatic missions. Around the king's town are domed buildings, woods, and copses where live the sorcerers of these people, the men in charge of the religious cult. . . .

Of the people who follow the king's religion, only he and his heir presumptive, who is the son of his sister, may wear sewn clothes. All the other people wear clothes of cotton, silk, or brocade, according to their means. All men shave their beards and women shave their heads. The king adorns himself like a woman, wearing necklaces and bracelets, and when he sits before the people he puts on a high cap decorated with gold and wrapped in a turban of fine cotton. The court of appeal [for grievances against officials] is held in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses with gold embroidered trappings. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold, and on his right are the sons of the subordinate kings of his country, all wearing splendid garments and their hair mixed with gold. . . . When the people professing the same religion as the king approach him, they fall on their knees and sprinkle their heads with dust, for this is their way of showing him their respect. As for the Muslims, they greet him only by clapping their hands.

What Do You Think?

- ▶ What does this passage indicate about life in ancient Ghana?
- ▶ According to Al Bakri, in what ways do customs in Kumbi Saleh differ from customs in Arab lands?



Mansa Musa ruled the Empire of Mali from 1312 to 1337.

religious fervor as by economic interest, the Almorvids retaliated in 1076 by conquering Ghana. The Soninke regained their independence in 1087, but a little over a century later fell to the Sosso, a previously tributary people, who destroyed Kumbi Saleh.

The Empire of Mali, 1230–1468

Following the defeat of Ghana by the Almorvids, many western Sudanese peoples competed for political and economic power. This contest ended in 1235 when the Mandinka, under their legendary leader Sundiata (c. 1210–1260), defeated the Sosso at the Battle of Kirina. Sundiata went on to forge the Empire of Mali.

Mali, which means “where the emperor resides,” was socially, politically, and economically similar to Ghana. Stretching 1,500 miles from the Atlantic coast to the region east of the Niger River, Mali was centered farther south than Ghana, in a region of greater rainfall and more abundant crops. Sundiata gained direct control of the gold mines of

Wangara, making his empire wealthier than Ghana had been. As a result, Mali's population grew, reaching a total of eight million.

Sundiata was also an important figure in western Sudanese religion. According to legend, he wielded magical powers to defeat his enemies. But Sundiata was a Muslim and helped make Mali—at least superficially—a Muslim state. West Africans had been converting to Islam since Arab traders began arriving in the region centuries before. By Sundiata's time, most merchants and bureaucrats were Muslims, and the empire's rulers gained stature among Arab states by converting to Islam.

To administer their vast empire at a time when communication was slow, Mali's rulers relied heavily on personal and family ties with local chiefs. Mali's most important city was Timbuktu, which had been established during the eleventh century beside the Niger River near the southern edge of the Sahara Desert.

By the thirteenth century, Timbuktu was a major hub for trade in gold, slaves, and salt. It attracted merchants from throughout the Mediterranean world and became a center of Islamic learning. There were several mosques in the city, 150 Islamic schools, a law school, and many book dealers. It supported a cosmopolitan community and impressed visitors with its absence of religious and ethnic intolerance. Even though Mali enslaved war captives and traded slaves, an Arab traveler noted in 1352–1353, "the Negroes possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people."

The Mali Empire reached its peak during the reign of Mansa Musa (1312–1337). One of the wealthiest rulers the world has known, Musa made himself and Mali famous when in 1324 he undertook a pilgrimage across Africa to the Islamic holy city of Mecca in Arabia. With an entourage of sixty thousand, a train of one hundred elephants, and a propensity for distributing huge amounts of gold to those who greeted him along the way, Musa amazed the Islamic world. After Musa's death, however, Mali declined. In 1468, one of the most powerful of its formerly subject peoples, the Songhai, captured Timbuktu. Their leader, Sunni Ali, founded a new West African empire.



MAP 1-4 West and Central Africa, c. 1500

This map shows the Empire of Songhai (1464–1591), the Kongo kingdom (c. 1400–1700), and the major kingdoms of the West African forest region.

? How did the Western Sudanese empires' geographical location make them susceptible to slave trading?

The Empire of Songhai, 1464–1591

The Songhai were great traders and warriors. They had seceded from Mali in 1375. Under Sunni Ali, who reigned from 1464 to 1492, they built the last and largest of the western Sudanese empires (see Map 1-4). Sunni Ali required conquered peoples to pay tribute, but otherwise let them run their own affairs.

When Sunni Ali died by drowning, Askia Muhammad Toure led a successful revolt against Ali's son to make himself king of Songhai. The new king, who reigned from 1492 to 1528, extended the empire northward

into the Sahara, westward into Mali, and eastward to encompass the trading cities of Hausaland. He centralized the administration of the empire, replacing local chiefs with members of his family, substituting taxation for tribute, and establishing a bureaucracy to regulate trade.

A devout Muslim, Muhammad Toure used his power to spread the influence of Islam within the empire. During a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1497 he established diplomatic relations with Morocco and Egypt and recruited Moslem scholars to serve at the Sankore Mosque at Timbuktu. Despite these efforts, by the end of Muhammad Toure's reign (the aging ruler, senile and blind, was deposed by family members), Islamic culture was still weak in West Africa outside urban areas. Peasants, who made up 95 percent of the population, spoke a variety of languages, continued to practice indigenous religions, and remained loyal to their local chiefs.

Songhai reached its peak of influence under Askia Daud between 1549 and 1582. But the political balance of power in West Africa was changing rapidly, and Songhai failed to adapt. Since the 1430s, adventurers from Portugal had been establishing trading centers along the Guinea coast seeking gold and diverting it from the trans-Saharan trade. Their success threatened the Arab rulers of North Africa, Songhai's traditional partners in the trans-Saharan trade. In 1591 the king of Morocco, hoping to regain access to West African gold, sent an army of mercenaries armed with muskets and cannons across the Sahara to attack Gao, Songhai's capital. The Songhai forces were armed only with bows and lances, which were no match for firearms. Its army destroyed, the Songhai empire fell apart. West Africa was without a government powerful enough to intervene when the Portuguese, other Europeans, and the African kingdoms of the Guinea Coast became more interested in trading for human beings than for gold.

The West African Forest Region

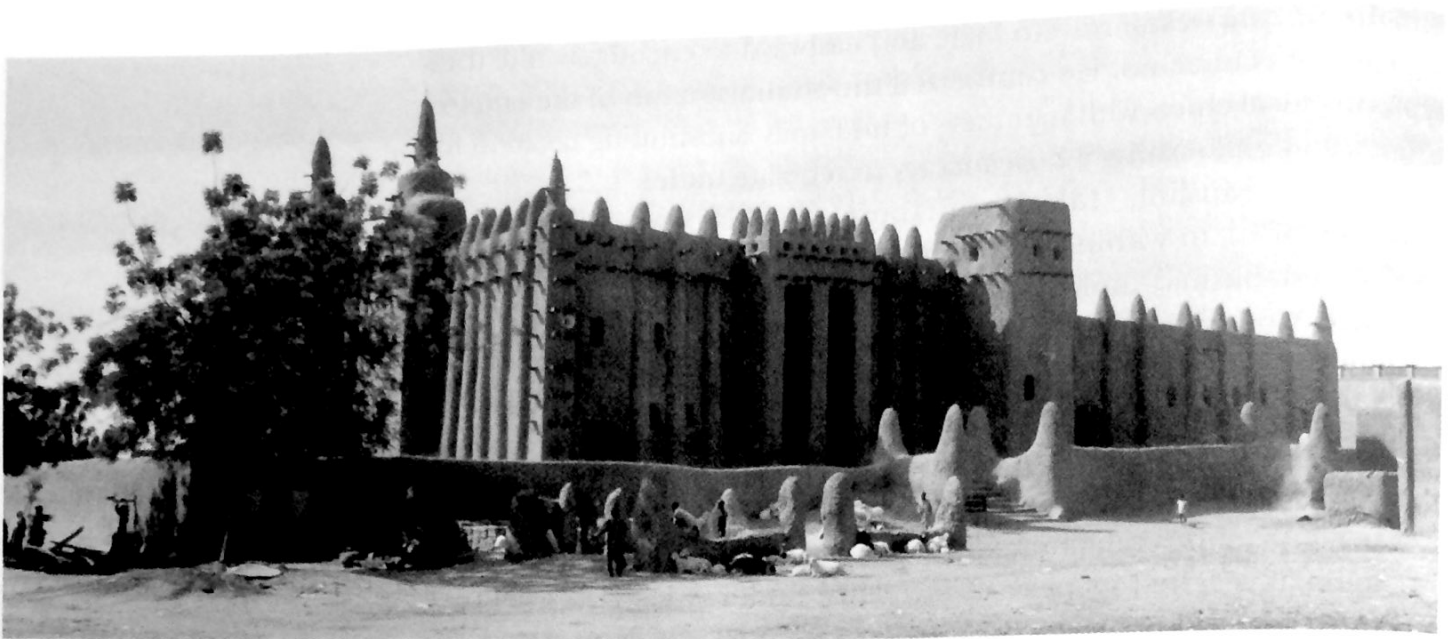
The area called the **forest region** of West Africa, which includes stretches of savannah, extends two thousand miles along the Atlantic coast from Senegambia in the northwest to the former kingdom of Benin (modern Cameroon) in the east. Among the early settlers of the forest region were the Nok, who around 500 BCE, in what is today southern Nigeria, created a culture noted for its iron working technology and its terra-cotta sculptures. But significant migration into the forests began only after 1000 CE, as the western Sudanese climate became increasingly dry.

The peoples of the forest region are of particular importance for African-American history because of the role they played in the Atlantic slave trade as both slave traders and as victims of the trade.

Because people migrated southward from the Sudan in small groups over an extended period, the process brought about considerable cultural diversification. A variety of languages, economies, political systems, and traditions came into existence. Some ancient customs survived, such as dividing types of agricultural labor by gender and living in villages composed of



The Nok people of what is today Nigeria produced terra-cotta sculptures like this one during the first millennium BCE.



The **great mosque** at the West African city of Jenne was first built during the fourteenth century CE.

extended families. The forest region became a patchwork of diverse ethnic groups with related, but sometimes quite different, ways of life.

Colonizing a region covered with thick vegetation was hard work. In some portions of the forest, agriculture did not supplant hunting and gathering until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In more open parts of the region, however, several small kingdoms emerged centuries earlier. Benin City, for example, dates to the thirteenth century and life in Nigeria to the eleventh. Although none of these kingdoms ever grew as large as the empires of the western Sudan, some were powerful. They were ruled by kings who claimed semi divine status. Their power was limited by local nobility and urban elites. Kings sought to extend their power by conquering neighboring peoples. Secrecy and elaborate ritual marked royal courts, which were also centers of support for art and religion.

Senegambia and the Akan States

The inhabitants of Senegambia shared a common history and spoke closely related languages, but they were not politically united. Parts of the region had been incorporated within the empires of Ghana and Mali and had been exposed to Islamic influences. Senegambian society was strictly hierarchical, with royalty at the top and slaves at the bottom. Most people were farmers, growing rice, millet, sorghum, plantains, beans, and bananas. They supplemented their diet with fish, oysters, rabbits, and monkeys.

To the southeast of Senegambia were the Akan states. They emerged during the sixteenth century as the gold trade provided local rulers with the wealth they needed to clear forests and initiate agricultural economies. To accomplish this, the rulers traded gold from mines under their control for slaves, who did the difficult work of cutting trees and burning refuse. Then settlers received open fields from the rulers in return for a portion



Life-size bust of a Yoruba king — Obalufon II—is one of fifteen found in the city of Ife.