

The Gold Road-Introduction to the Kingdoms

Coined by Brenda Randolph (Howard University), the Gold Road celebrates the histories of trade and exchange that linked West African Sahel to the Mediterranean region and to the Arabian peninsula from the 5th to the 15th century, allowing for the development of the great kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. The kingdoms were organized into polities that subsumed smaller polities within them. These great empires thrived in West Africa from the years 500-1591 and their kingdoms represent an era of consolidated West African power and wealth for over a thousand years.

- **Ghana**-The first (500-1235) empire was a confederation of different Soninke peoples that gained power because it controlled routes through which gold was traded. Ghana maintained its indigenous religion but also began to Islamize in the 9th century, which is why its capital, **Kumbi-Saleh**, is composed of two cities - one Islamic city with a mosque, and another one for the king for ancestral religions, which allowed the king to maintain connection with the peasants and pastoralists. Archeological findings indicate that trade with the Muslim northerners was peaceful and that they entertained good relations. Ghana began losing its power because it depended on Amazigh Sanhaja traders who eventually took over the important trade city/stopover of **Awdaghust** through Almoravid (Amazigh) empire expansion from the North.
- **Mali**-Ghana was succeeded by the kingdom of Mali in 1235. Mali was similar to Ghana as a polity of ethnic confederation of Mande peoples which expanded its territory by absorbing different groups. Its leaders converted to Islam to a greater

*extent than Ghana's leaders. Islam helped Mali's rulers to gain legitimacy with the groups they incorporated within itself, and to gain recognition from the broader world. Mali's rulers went on pilgrimage to **Cairo and Mecca**. In Mali, the city of **Timbuktu** became a center for knowledge production and science, housing thousands of manuscripts in private libraries. Mali prospered through taxes on all goods brought into the empire. Famous rulers of Mali are **Sunjata**, the founder of the Mali empire and **Mansa Musa**, his great nephew.*

- ***Songhai**-Mali's empire lost its power starting in the 1300s after the death of Mansa Musa in 1337 when successive claims and grabs of the throne weakened Mali, allowing the Songhai coming from the East to take over, led by a great ruler named **Sonyi/Sunni Ali Beeri**. Similar to the Mali kingdom, Sonyi Ali Beeri took over territories of neighboring groups and expanded their territory. The Songhai ruled from 1469-1591 when it was conquered by the army of **Sultan Al Mansur** from **Morocco**, led by **Judar Pasha**. The fall of the Songhai empire was a pivotal turning point for West Africa because it ushered in a chaotic era of political fragmentation and war between small states and chieftaincies. This political vulnerability, in turn helped make way for the Transatlantic enslavement and trade of peoples.*