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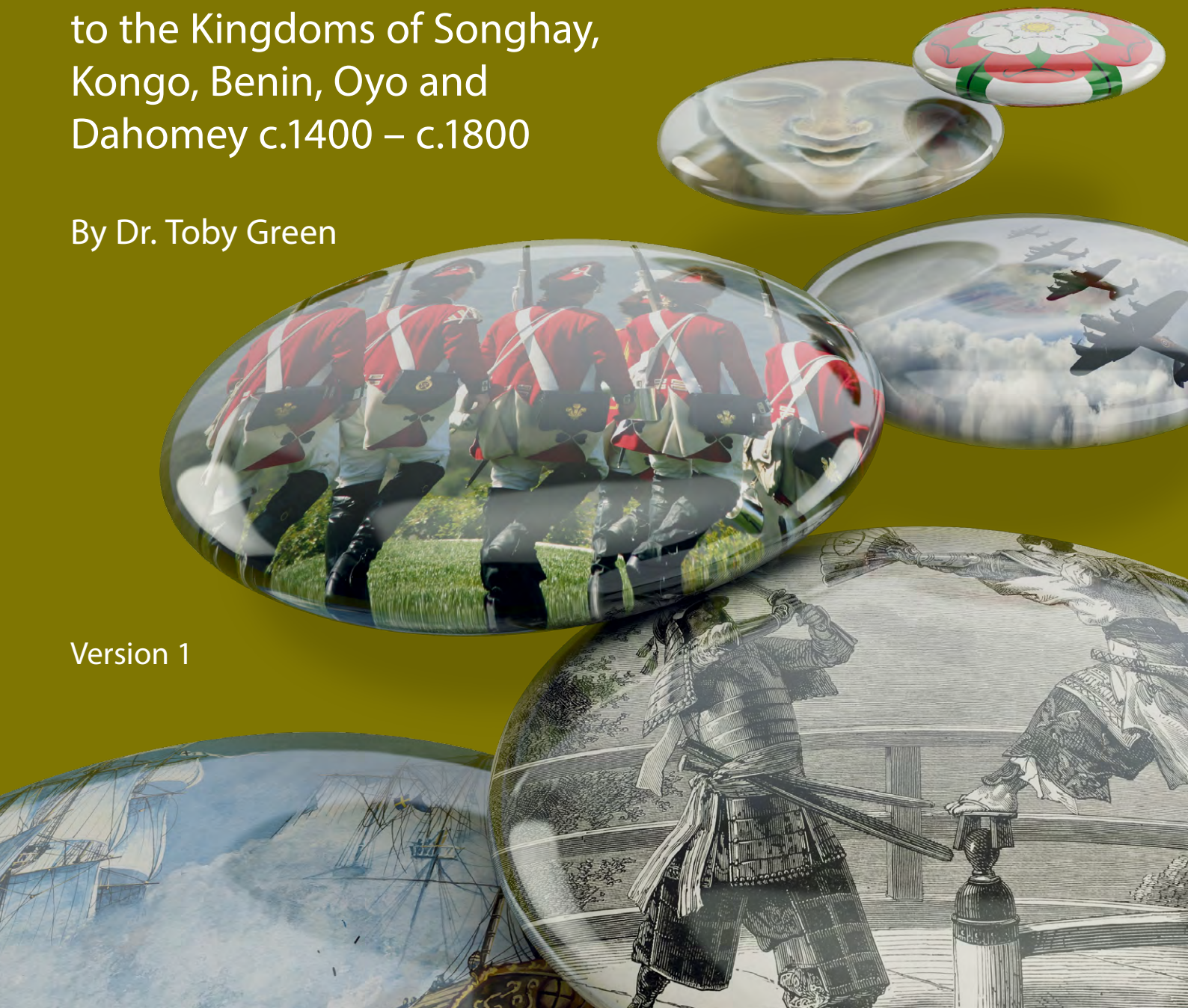
HISTORY A

H105/H505

African Kingdoms: A Guide
to the Kingdoms of Songhay,
Kongo, Benin, Oyo and
Dahomey c.1400 – c.1800

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Version 1





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Introduction:

Precolonial West African Kingdoms in context

This course book introduces A level students to the richness and depth of several of the kingdoms of West Africa which flourished in the centuries prior to the onset of European colonisation. For hundreds of years, the kingdoms of Benin, Dahomey, Kongo, Oyo and Songhay produced exquisite works of art – illustrated manuscripts, sculptures and statuary – developed complex state mechanisms, and built diplomatic links to Europe, North Africa and the Americas. These kingdoms rose and fell over time, in common with kingdoms around the world, along with patterns of global trade and local warfare. Looking at the history of this precolonial West African past introduces students to the many layers and complexities of both African and world history, and to how the histories of Africa and the world have interacted for many centuries. It is an opportunity both to build on pre-existing study skills which students have developed at GCSE, and to develop a more complex understanding both of African history, and of history itself as a discipline.

However, as this is the first time that students pursuing A level History have had the chance to study African histories in depth, it's important to set out both what is distinctive about African history and the themes and methods which are appropriate to its study. It's worth beginning by setting out the extent of the historical knowledge which has developed over the last fifty years on precolonial West Africa. Work by archaeologists, anthropologists, art historians, geographers and historians has revealed societies of great complexity and global interaction in West Africa from a very early time. This overturned earlier prejudices that African history was impossible to recover, and that, as the Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper put it in 1963, "Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness... [and] the unedifying gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe".

We now know that Trevor-Roper was wrong, and that a great deal can be known about the richness of precolonial West African kingdoms. If we are to begin with art, there is no questioning the richness of African artistic production in the centuries before colonialism. The famous Benin Bronzes, seized by a British military expedition from Benin – in what is now Nigeria – in 1897, and now housed in the British Museum's Africa rooms, reveal an extremely fine standard of bronze-working. The statues, friezes, and carvings were designed to illustrate the histories of the different Obas (kings) of Benin, and were housed at the royal palace. Visitors to the palace describe whole corridors given over to these bronze-workings, and the standard was such that the first British scholars to examine the collection assumed that the craftsmen were influenced by European technologies acquired through trade.

While Benin's bronze-working dates to perhaps c. 1200 BCE, it is thought to have really begun to flourish in the 16th century. At the same time, further north and west around the Atlantic coast at Sierra Leone, the Sapi peoples were renowned ivory carvers. Sapi salt cellars, knives, and ornaments were exported from the Sierra Leone region to the Portuguese court throughout the 16th century. Some of these ivory carvings are also held by the British Museum, while others exist at galleries around Europe. The Sapi are also believed to have influenced Portuguese architectural styles in the 16th



Above: Bronze casting from the kingdom of Benin c. 16th century, Horniman Museum

century, with the image of the rope a key element of both Sapi ivory carving and the Manuelline architectural style of the early 16th century. Far from this technology always being shaped by European trade, the reverse was thus also the case.



Sapi ivory carving from Sierra Leone. c. 16th century, Brooklyn Museum

These examples give a taste of the richness of the histories of exchanges between West African kingdoms and European societies in the precolonial period. Beyond the reciprocal cultural influences, African diplomacy was a commonplace. In the late 15th century, the Jolof prince Bumi Jeléen visited Portugal to seek support for his claim to the Jolof throne in Senegambia; Jolof ambassadors resided in Portugal for much of the 16th century, where there were also ambassadors from Kongo and from the Angolan kingdom of Ndongo. In the 17th century, Kongo expanded its diplomatic initiatives with ambassadors at the Vatican and at the Dutch court in north-eastern Brazil in the 1630s and 1640s, and frequent exchanges of correspondence with the States-General Assembly of the Netherlands throughout the first half of the century. Other West African kingdoms followed suit: in what is now the republic of Benin, the kingdom of Allada sent embassies to Spain in the 1650s, and had some diplomatic engagement with England; in the 18th century, Dahomey – a successor state to Allada – sent several embassies to Brazil.

All this makes it clear that many West African kingdoms had complex state infrastructures and conducted diplomatic ventures which are not well known by

historians and students today. These were kingdoms heavily engaged in international trade, and they sought their own advantage just as did European actors in the trade. Their trade was by no means limited to the Europeans in the Atlantic, for there was an age-old trade across the Sahara desert, and ambassadors and traders from Cairo and Tripoli were frequently found in many of the kingdoms to be studied on this course, especially in Songhay, Dahomey and Oyo. West Africa was a zone where different cultural and commercial influences interacted, and this plurality of exchanges was one of the things which helped to forge the social structures that emerged there.

Themes and Methods in the Study of Precolonial West Africa

Nevertheless, the study of precolonial West Africa is complicated by two major factors. The first of these is the nature of the source material available. Whereas most Western history is written on the basis of written documents and printed books, historians of West Africa use a more diverse source base. History in Africa is primarily an oral genre, recounted by praisesingers and stored in performances of songs and narratives of migration. With the exception of Songhay, the kingdoms studied on this course did not keep written records. Their history must be studied through a variety of alternative sources: written records by outsiders (usually Europeans); archaeology; the study of the relevant African languages and how these changed over time; and the use of oral histories and anthropological perspectives. The historians who have studied these kingdoms' histories have all drawn on a variety of these sources, using them together to reconstruct a complex past.



Sierra Leonean Ivory pyx c. 15th/16th century, Walters Art Museum

Studying history and what historians have said about history involves first of all understanding the basis on which claims are made. So it's very important to understand the sort of source base which has been used to construct the narratives of the West African kingdoms which are found in this textbook. Understanding the source base is one of the first tasks of the historian, and the range of sources used in studying African history explains why this is a subject which helps to broaden students' understanding of what thinking about history actually involves.

The way in which such sources work together is best understood through an example. My own book on the early trans-Atlantic slave trade – *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa 1300-1589* - was based on three major types of source. The first consisted of written records housed in archives in Portugal, Spain and Latin America, which reconstructed elements of the slave trade and also of social interactions between various West African peoples and European traders and colonial officials. The second type was that of oral history, drawn both from my own interviews in Guinea-Bissau and Senegal, and from a collection of recordings from the Research and Documentation Division for the Gambian National Centre for Arts and Culture (now digitised by the British Library). Finally I drew on anthropological analysis of social structures which helps to piece together the way in which West African social structures influenced the emergence of early African Atlantic trading communities.

Putting together different types of sources is very important in thinking about West African history. The sources we use shape a discourse about the past. If we use European textual sources, we would believe that only the history of trade, slavery, and relations between Europeans and African kingdoms matters to precolonial West African history; oral West African sources point rather to the importance of kingship, religion, dependence on powerful figures, commerce and migration. By bringing both sources together, a balanced view of the West African past can emerge; but by using only one type of source, a skewed perspective on that past is more likely.

This brings us to the second major factor complicating the study of the West African past, which is the context of Africa's historical relationship to Europe. The violent realities of slavery and colonialism went with the development in Europe of ideas which belittled African societies and their achievements. The enlightenment German philosopher GWF Hegel declared that Africa was "no part of the historical process", and racist thought



Praise Singer depicted by Allen Francis Gardiner c. 1836

riddled the ideas of famous enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant. The legacy of these ideas can be seen in Trevor-Roper's prejudice against African history, and even as recently as 2007, the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy made an infamous speech in the Senegalese capital Dakar which repeated many of the familiar tropes of Africa as "outside history".

A further consequence of these prejudices has been the tendency of people in the West to speak far too generally about "Africa". The Congolese philosopher VY Mudimbe reminds us in his book *The Invention of Africa* that the continent of "Africa" is itself a Western invention, which emerged in the 18th century alongside the racist ideas of the Enlightenment. A Senegambian in the 15th century had much more in common with someone from Portugal than they did with someone from – say – Kongo: Islam was practised in both Senegambia and Portugal, and there was a shared language for some in Arabic, where none of that was the case in Kongo. The essentialisation of "Africa" – and indeed Europe – has meant that outsiders writing about the continent have been far too ready to lump very different peoples together: that indeed is one of the reasons this course focusses on West Africa, where the kingdoms examined were connected to one another and shared certain common features.

The clearest example of where this essentialisation of Africa matters is through the case of slavery. It is sometimes said that “Africans sold Africans” into slavery. But this is to misunderstand precolonial “Africa”, where people saw themselves not as “African” but as from Benin, Dahomey, Kongo, Oyo or Songhay; similarly they did not see those sold into slavery as “African”, but as people of a particular background, with certain kin connections and a particular status in their own society. Understanding the history of West Africa and of slavery requires first of all the realisation that this involves the study of African histories, not African history.

The place of slavery is of course deeply important, and controversial. So many are the misconceptions regarding slavery in Africa that it is impossible to do justice to do them here. But some comments are in order. The history of precolonial West Africa is not the same as the history of slavery: there are many other facets of precolonial West African history and achievements, and a reductive focus on slavery overshadows these. Nor was the history of slavery one of Europeans “seizing” Africans. This did happen, and warfare conducted by European armies and their mercenaries was important in the region of Angola; nevertheless, most enslaved Africans were not seized by Europeans but sold to slave ships through a complex process of trade and dependency. As the slave trade grew, so did the dependency of West African kingdoms on it for trade and wealth, and so, as the historian Paul Lovejoy has argued, did the institution of slavery in West Africa itself. The impact of the Atlantic slave trade on West African societies was therefore vast, and certainly contributed to their economic divergence from the growing wealth of Western Europe.

But at the same time to focus too hard on this subject runs the risk of portraying “Africans” solely as victims in the historical process, and ignoring the many achievements of West African societies which students have the chance to study on this course. As the first president of independent Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, said: ‘We should write our history as the history of our society in all its fullness. Its history should be a reflection of its self, and contact with Europeans should only figure in it from the viewpoint of the African experience.’



Photograph of a Ngoni, an ancient traditional instrument found throughout West Africa

Conclusion: Influences of West African Kingdoms in the World

In the end, one of the most important reasons to study precolonial West African kingdoms is that they were key – and largely forgotten – agents in the construction of so much of modern societies. Beyond their importance in their own right, and the way in which thinking about West African histories helps us to think about history more broadly, much of what is taken for granted about modernity originated here.

Thinking back to the works of art we have already discussed in this introduction from Benin and Sierra Leone, there is no doubt that the figurative artistic styles developed in West Africa in the precolonial period have hugely influenced modern Western art. The leading figures in the Cubist style developed before the First World War in France, such as Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, were greatly influenced by the new finds in African art such as the Benin Bronzes. The cubists borrowed – or stole – the African approach to form and figure, and from there sprang modern Art’s move away from strict representation as its aim. Figures such as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol moved from there to bringing in manufactured objects – urinals and soup cans, most famously – as works of art; but the incorporation of manufactured objects into artistic constructions, especially at religious shrines, was something that West African artists on the continent and in the diaspora had long practised.

The case of music is no less important. A generation of musicologists such as Theodore Coolen and Daniel Jatta have now shown comprehensively that the origins of blues music lie in the Senegambian region, among instruments such as the akonting and the ngoni. These instruments gave rise to the banjo, and the blues then

defined key aspects of both the culture of the American South and the emergence of styles such as Bossa Nova in Brazil. The origins of much modern music therefore lie in the social structures and instruments developed in West Africa long before the slave trade to the New World began.

Many other examples could be cited, but all of this is to give just a flavour of the enormous importance of understanding West African histories and their place in the formation of the modern world. For a long time students of history in the West thought that little could be found out about the African past, but that this did not matter as it was of little relevance. This course challenges that view, and will hopefully stimulate all students to think about what we can really know about the past, and why that past matters.

Resource List: Background reading

Sylviane Diouf (ed), *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African strategies* (2004; Ohio University Press)

John D. Fage with William Tordoff, *A History of Africa* (2002; Routledge)

Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300-1589* (2012; Cambridge University Press)

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (2007; Cambridge University Press)

Herbert Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (2010; Cambridge University Press)

Kwase Konadu, *Transatlantic Africa, 1440-1888* (2014; Oxford University Press)

Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: a history of slavery in Africa* (2011; Cambridge University Press)

VY Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (1990; James Currey)

John Parker and Richard Rathbone, *African History: A Very Short Introduction* (2007; Oxford University Press)



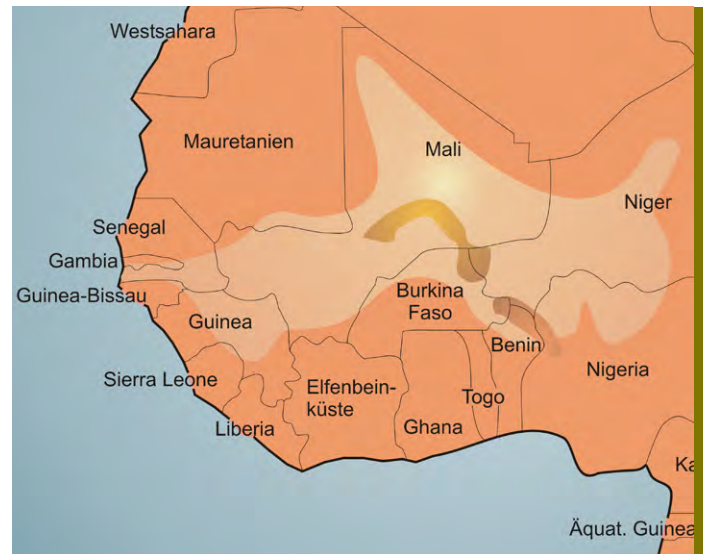
Image of an Akonting, a folk lute found in Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau in West Africa.

Chapter One:

The Songhay Empire

The history of the Songhay empire can represent much of the growth and importance of West African kingdoms during the precolonial period. Touching regions as distinct as the Gold Coast in the South, and Cairo, Mecca and Spain in the North, the influences and connections of Songhay show how early parts of West Africa were placed within global links through trade and cultural reciprocities. Songhay was however the last of the great Sahelian empires that rose initially in the 10th century in the region of what is now Mauritania.

For many centuries the Niger river formed the heartland of the political systems of West Africa. Great and famous cities arose along it such as Djenné, Mopti, Timbuktu and Gao, prospering along with the heavy riverine trade and the commerce that linked West Africa to North Africa and the Islamic world. The Ghāna empire rose in the region of what is now Mauritania in the 10th century, flourishing until it collapsed c. 1076-77 under the weight of



The Songhay Empire c.1625

invasions from Almoravid Berbers. Ghāna's king had not been converted to Islam, while the Almoravids had led a jihād across North Africa and into Spain against impure practice of the faith. The Ghāna empire was the heartland of peoples known as the Soninké, and after its fall many of them migrated east towards the Niger river where they founded the empire of Mali c. 1235 under the famous emperor Sunjata Keita.

Mali gradually grew to be the most powerful empire in West Africa, flourishing for two centuries on the back of the trans-Saharan gold trade. It was the heartland of the Mande peoples of West Africa, well known in North Africa and Iberia as well as in West Africa. In 1321, the Mali emperor Mansa Musa embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca, where so much gold was left in Cairo that it caused a rapid inflation; 50 years later, when the Majorcan Jewish cartographer constructed his Catalan Atlas in 1375, he depicted the king of "Melli" with a large nugget of gold in his hands. Mansa Musa was a cosmopolitan ruler with heavy international connections, and other accounts described how his slaves included those from the Ottoman lands of Turkey. Arabic chroniclers such as Al-Idrīsi depicted the wealth of the Mansas in different terms, meanwhile, describing how one of them had despatched two large fleets into the Atlantic ocean.

Mali's power began to wane in the 15th century. Its centre was in the upper Niger valley, around Djenné and the borderlands of what are now the Republics of Guinea and Mali. The locus of power began to shift further east towards the city of Gao, which was to become the capital of the Songhay empire, which flourished from over a



Earthenware maternity scene, Djenné, c.1100–c.1400

century between the 1460s and 1591. It was in 1591 that a military expedition sent by Sultan Al-Mansur of Morocco destroyed the Songhay army and precipitated the collapse of the empire into a series of small states along the Niger river known as the Arma states. Songhay was thus the last of the powerful Niger bend empires, its fall signalling the end of the large multi-ethnic empires which had characterised political power in the Sahel for half a millennium.

Songhay's importance is fundamental to many aspects of West African history. Not only did the Songhay Askias (Emperors) expand upon the Soninké traditions of kingship which characterised the empires of Ghāna and Mali, but it was also under the Askias that the role of Islamic scholars became ever more central to the articulation of political and religious power in West Africa. It was under the Askias that Timbuktu rose to become a centre of Islamic jurisprudence and scholarship for the whole of West Africa. Its role in this area was to remain important through to the late 18th century, when important political leaders such as Uthman dan Fodio of Sokoto (in north-western Nigeria) were strongly influenced by the ideals developed by the *salihs* (wise scholars) of Timbuktu. Such a deep-rooted history left lasting legacies, and the most powerful physical reminders of the past of Songhay and its successor states in the form of the many thousands of Islamic manuscripts from Timbuktu and the surrounding area which are still preserved today.

Situation in Sahelian Africa to 1450; Reasons for the rise of the Songhay Empire and collapse of Mali Empire

Scholars and students of Songhay and the wider Sahelian region are fortunate to have a number of Arabic sources (many of which have been translated into English) from which to build a picture of the past. Starting with the 11th-century geographer Al-Bakri, there are numerous sources which, when combined with archaeological work, provide quite a detailed picture of the rise and fall of Songhay and its predecessor states.

Any analysis of Songhay has to first begin with an understanding of its relationship to Mali. For Songhay was at first a tributary province of the Mali empire, and only began to break away from Mali in the 1430s. Songhay's origins date far further back than this, however, and the scholar John Hunwick has shown how Gao's power within Songhay appears to have arisen in the 10th century owing to its role in the trans-Saharan trade. In Gao, traders were able to exchange Saharan salt for mats,



A Dogon sculpture of a couple, probably used as a prestige display at the funeral of a wealthy man

gourds, wax, honey, iron goods and cloth made further south along the Niger in the town of Kukiya, regarded by many as the cradle of the first Songhay dynasty. Given the growing presence of Islamic traders in Gao through the trade, the locus of political power moved here from Kukiya in around the 10th century; separate towns were established by the late 10th century for Muslims and non-Muslims on either side of the Niger, a practice which also appears to have shaped the urban and religious architecture of Djenné and Ghāna at the same time. The growing importance of Islam and its relationship to trade meant that by 1068, according to Al-Bakri, only a Muslim could rule Gao; nevertheless, the Islamic orthodoxy of these rulers was thin, and in practice they usually blended Islamic belief and customs with those of the Songhay, while Islamic practice did not extend beyond the ruling elite.

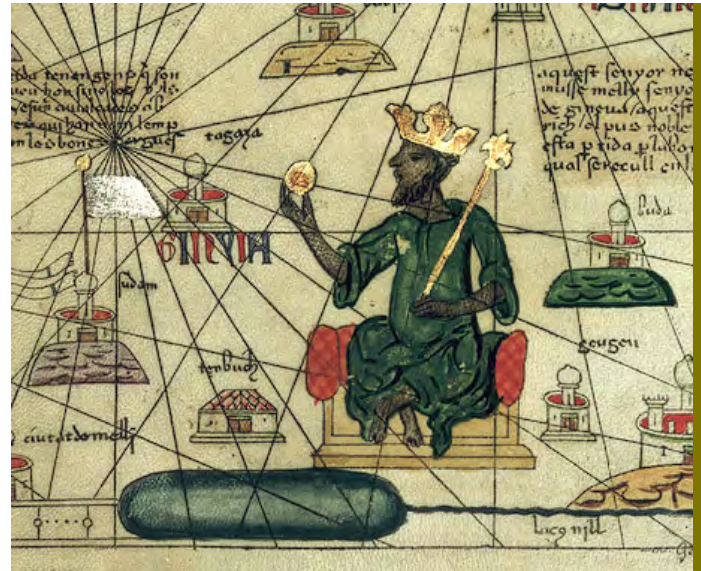
In spite of the growing importance of Gao as a heartland of Songhay, the rise of Mali compromised its political independence. Songhay was indeed situated between Mali and the strong central Sahelian state of Kanem-Borno (on the borders of modern Chad and Nigeria), which was so big in the 14th century according to Al'Umari that there were three months of travelling from the north to the south of the kingdom, and which also had diplomatic connections to Cairo and the Muslim world. Located in between these major powers, Songhay chose to side with Mali, and in the 13th century, Mali gained political control of the Middle Niger valley in which Gao is situated, and the writer Al-Dimashqī (c. 1256-1327) described how cotton was traded from Gao to the heartland of Mali; so by c. 1300 it is clear that the region around Gao

in the Niger valley was a source of agricultural tribute with organised farms for the collection of tribute. This political dependence on Mali was to remain important throughout the 14th century, when Mali rose to international prominence through its gold reserves and the pilgrimages of Mansa Musa.

Mali's power was structured around its centrality in the gold trade. It was mined by non-Muslims who paid it as a sort of tribute to the Mansas of Mali, according to Ibn al-Dawādārī's account of Mansa Musa's sojourn in Cairo (composed c. 1331-35). It was the centrality of this trade in the 14th century for the economies of North Africa and Europe which allowed the Mansas to develop great wealth and prestige. One of the most influential cities in the empire was Djenné, which was the meeting point for the trade in gold from the forest regions of what are now Ghana and Ivory Coast and the salt trade from the Saharan mine of Taghāza. Djenné was said by the 17th century chronicler Al-Sa'dī to have had 7077 villages in the surrounding area, and prized its fierce independence.

It was thus the growth of centres such as Djenné which epitomised the rise of the Mali empire. With the pilgrimage of Mansa Musa in the 1320s, the reputation of this West African kingdom became famous on a global stage. Al-Sa'dī described how Mansa Musa's party included 60,000 soldiers and 500 slaves, each of which bearing a wand made of pure gold weighing around 500 mg (2 kilogrammes). Writing in 1337-8, Al-'Umari described the court of the Mansa of Mali in tones of reverence and admiration: "The king of this realm sits in his palace on a big dais which they call *banbí*....on a big seat made of ebony, like a throne...Over the dais, on all sides, are elephant tusks one beside the other. He has with him his arms, which are all of gold – sword, javelin, quiver, bow, and arrows. ...About 30 slaves stand behind him, Turks and others that are bought for him in Egypt. One of them carries in his hand a parasol of silk surmounted by a dome and a bird of gold in the shape of a falcon. His emirs sit around and below him in two ranks to right and left. Further away are seated the chief horsemen of the army".

The reign of Mansa Musa was to prove the high point of the Mali empire. According to Al-Sa'dī it was after this that Songhay and Timbuktu submitted to Mali, while the Mansa also ordered the construction of a mosque in Gao and a palace in Timbuktu on his return from Cairo and Mecca. However from this high watermark in the late 1320s, a series of reverses afflicted Mali, and Songhay began to show increasing signs of independence by 1400. This cause was further aided by growing raids from Tuareg nomads from the desert regions, who finally seized control of Timbuktu in 1433-4. According to Al Sa'dī, "the Malians, bewildered by their many depredations, refused



The Emperor of Mali, Mansa Musa illustrated in the Catalan Atlas c.1375

to make a stand against them. [The Tuareg] said: 'The sultan who does not defend his territory has no right to rule it.' So the Malians abandoned Timbuktu and returned to Mali".

This retreat was part of the gathering storm which faced Mali from around 1400, as it faced attacks not only from the Tuareg but also from the Mossi and Songhay peoples. During the 14th century, the importance of the *Sonni* title had risen in Songhay. Though still tributary to Mali, the *Sonnis* were recognised as the titleholders of rulers in Gao. In the early 1400s, Sonni Mohamed Da'o led an expedition against Mali and returned with prisoners, testament to the increasing instability of the Mali empire. This expedition also led to the incorporation of tributary peoples into Songhay power such as the Bambara, Fula, and fishermen castes of the Niger river. This policy of westward expansion was moreover continued by Sonni Souleyman Dam, who attacked and destroyed the rich Soninké city of Méma, to the west of Timbuktu.

The decline of Mali was thus a major feature of political life in the Sahelian region of West Africa in the 15th century. The growing connections of the region to North Africa through the gold trade had given rise to more powerful states in the region, who began to jockey for position. A source of instability, it was also a source of opportunity for some such as the *Sonnis* of Songhay. Mali had been at its peak a very complex and large state, with 36 sultans or provincial rulers according to Al-Sa'dī: so extensive were the lands of Mali, he said, that the "ruler of Mali brought Songhay, Timbuktu, Mema and Baghāma and their territories under his sway to as far as the salt sea [Atlantic Ocean]". Yet this political power came at the cost of the violence that went with an expansionist military force, and bred resentment. Military command was split between commanders in the south and north who in turn had officers and troops who were despatched on raids. This "outsourcing" of military power "led to tyranny,

high-handedness and the violation of people's rights in the latter days of their rule". Resentment grew, and when alternative political powers rose in the 15th century, along with the power of kingdoms such as Songhay, it was all too easy for the *Sonnis* to prise loyal dependants away from Mali and thereby to support their rise to power on the Niger Bend.



The tomb of Askia Mohammed, ruler of the Songhai empire from 1493 to 1528, at Gao

Sonni and Askia Dynasties; Sonni Ali and the Capture of Timbuktu in 1468; Territorial Expansion, Nature and Development of the Military

The great epoch of Songhay expansion occurred in the second half of the 15th century under Sonni Ali and the early 16th century under his successor, Askia Mohammed. The adoption of a new title by Askia Mohammed was very important as an indication of the changes taking place. Under Sonni Ali, there were serious tensions and conflict between the Sonni dynasty in Gao and the Islamic jurists and scholars based in Timbuktu. The adoption of the title Askia indicated a change of direction: one of Askia Mohammed's first acts as emperor was to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, and scholars from Timbuktu were placed at the heart of the Songhay regime thereafter. By changing title, therefore, Mohammed indicated a fundamental change of the ideologies governing the Songhay empire.

Sonni Ali came to power in 1464 following the death of his predecessor, Sonni Souleiman Dam. Where Souleiman had led Songhay expansion to the West, Ali continued the tradition. He led military campaigns against the Mossi, against the Tuareg to the North, and conquered the city of Djenné in 1472 after a siege said to have lasted 7 years, 7 months and 7 days. One of the greatest military successes was the capture of Timbuktu, in 1468. This was followed by great hostility directed towards the scholarly class

of the city, who never forgave him: writing well over a century after his death, Al-Sa'di described him as "a man of great strength and colossal energy, a tyrant, a miscreant, an aggressor, a despot, and a butcher...he tyrannized the scholars and holy men, killing them, insulting them, and humiliating them".

Nevertheless, Sonni Ali's relationship with the Muslim clerics was not quite so brutal as this picture portrays. Even Al-Sa'di recognised that "despite his bad treatment of the scholars, Sunni 'Ali acknowledged their worth, and showed kindness and respect to some of them. He would say, 'were it not for the scholars, life would not be so pleasant or agreeable". In practice, the harsh repression of the Ulemas (scholars) lasted especially from 1468 to 1473, as the historian of Songhay Sékéné Mody Cissoko points out. The period from 1477 to 1485 saw a rapprochement, although repression of the clerics began again after that. The major cause of the discord between the two camps was that the Ulemas had been allies of the Tuareg who had controlled the city before Sonni Ali's invasion; as Cissoko notes, most of the clerics in Timbuktu were Berbers who had come from across the Sahel, and so they were not sympathetic to the Songhay invasion.

A great part of the hostility of Timbuktu's scholars towards Sonni Ali was owing to the success of this ruler whose attachment to Islam was weak. Though he did profess Islam, and the North African scholar Al-Maghili acknowledged that he prayed and observed the fasts at Ramadan, Sonni Ali retained an attachment to non-Islamic beliefs and customs. He did not, for instance, permit the acceptance of Shari'a in Songhay, and he saw no barrier to enslaving Muslims. That none of this prevented the Songhay empire expanding so rapidly under his leadership therefore posed a serious ideological and political challenge to the scholars of Timbuktu, who reacted with concomitant fury in their texts regarding him. As Al-Maghili put it, "he used to worship idols, believe in the soothsayers' [pronouncements], seek help from magicians, and venerate certain trees and stones by slaughtering at them and by giving alms".

Sonni Ali's political success was indeed remarkable. During the 28 years of his reign, he not only captured Timbuktu and established an empire stretching from Gao to beyond Djenné in the west and north into Tuareg lands, but he also incorporated peoples from many different backgrounds: Dogon, Mande, Soninké and Tuareg. This multi-ethnic background made of Songhay a political empire comparable in its diversity to many other empires of this time in other regions of the world. The army evolved as the provinces of the empire grew, with each provincial governor controlling the military forces in his region. Soldiers fought with metal breastplates, and

with knives, sabres, lances and bows and arrows, while an elite cavalry and also participated along with battle canoes on the Niger river. With this strong military force and the growing agricultural and economic power in the lands of its control, by the time of Sonni Ali's death in November 1492 Songhay was a polity to be reckoned with.



The Great mosque at Djenne c.1300

It is an important factor that power within Songhay was at this time polarised; the initial successor to Ali, Sonni Bâro, was opposed by a Muslim faction, and in the battle of Angao on April 2nd 1493 their choice won. Askia Mohammed – previously the Tondi-farma, or governor of the Bandiagara province in western Songhay - took power. He soon legitimised his power by embarking on the hajj to Mecca in 1496. Travelling via Egypt with a retinue of 1500 people and a treasure of 30000 dinars, by the time of his return his power had been consolidated on the Middle Niger; the Abbasid Caliph of Cairo had granted him power to rule the “lands of Takrur” (as the whole region as known in Arabic). By the end of his reign, in 1528, the whole region linking what is now western Mali and northern Nigeria was ruled by a Songhay empire in which the spread of Islamic law and knowledge was becoming increasingly important, and where it was in fact the collective observance of Islam by ruling elites which created the political and ideological “glue” to hold the empire together.

A major feature of Askia Mohammed's reign was his expansion of the kingdom, in continuity with what had gone before. He proceeded to seek to extend Songhay's boundaries, twice attacking Agades (in central Niger) in 1501 and 1515, and annexing Katsina and Kano (in northern Nigeria, 1514) to the east. Campaigns were

also led against Borgu in central Nigeria (1505-6), Air and Tindirma in the Sahara (1500-1501), and against Kebbi to the east (1517-18). It was under Askia Mohammed that many of the military features described above were consolidated, and new military titles founded to ensure greater imperial control.

Ideological transformations and consolidations were thus major aspects of Askia Mohammed's rule. Having come to power with the support of the Muslim segment of Songhay, an important aspect of his rule was his improved treatment of the Ulemas in comparison to the reign of Sonni Ali. The scholars did not forget his work, and Al-Sa'di described how he “befriended the scholars and sought counsel from them over the appointments and dismissals he made”. The empire itself prospered and it was remembered how the court was splendidly appointed, embellished with more courtiers and provided with extravagant garments, musical instruments and singers.

Such cultural innovations continued under his son, Askia Dawūd (1548-82), when an imperial library was established and Songhay's power consolidated. Al-Sa'di described how Dawūd was “eloquent, a born leader, generous, magnanimous, cheerful and good-humoured, fond of joking...he had calligraphers copying books for him, and would sometimes make gifts of them to scholars”. However, Dawūd's reign was preceded and followed by episodes of violent civil strife as rival factions battled to place their candidate in power. This civil conflict always had the potential to undermine Songhay's power and unity, and contributed to the fall of the empire after the Moroccan invasions of 1591.

Political, social, military and economic nature of the Songhay empire: Problems and achievements, administration and political centralisation

In order to sustain this rapid political expansion, Songhay required not only a well-equipped, organised and trained military force but also the administrative capacity to rule the provinces of the empire. This was facilitated by the expansion of administrative titles and capacities, something which began as soon as Songhay power began to grow effectively in the latter part of the 15th century.

After the initial expansion led by Sonni Ali, the empire was divided into new provinces with chiefs who recognised his authority. There were 8 provinces all told: Bara (an old Mande province), Dirma, Bani (south of Djenné), Kala, Tondi, Katala, Baghena and Taraton. In order to

consolidate royal authority over these distant provinces, Ali made regular voyages, and also established royal residences in 3 of them, Kukyia, Kabara and Dirma. The central administration of the empire was however run from Gao, where there were the imperial administrative offices, an imperial council of military leaders (known as the Sounna), and a corps of dignitaries.

One indice of the growing administrative capacity of Songhay is the diversity of titles which grew along with the empire. Farmas were governors, and there were many of these throughout the provinces of the empire. There were in addition key officers related to property and taxes, including the Fari-Mondiyo (overseer of royal estates and taxes), the Jenne-Mondiyo (administrator of Djenné), and the Yūbu-koi (chief of the market). Meanwhile, the fact that it was the Niger river which was in many ways the economic heart of the empire is shown through the number of officers related to its trade, such as the goima-koi (harbourmaster) and hi-koi (chief of boats). There were also, in addition, many different military offices such as commanders of foot soldiers (Rabb al-tariq) and the commander of the cavalry (Bāray-Koi).

Under Askia Mohammed, several new innovations followed in order to consolidate the running of the empire. He established an entirely new office, the Kanfari, as a viceroy of the growing western provinces and gave the role to his brother 'Umar Kondiakka; he then left the empire in the Kanfari's hands during the 2 years when he was absent on the hajj to Mecca. The administrative offices at Gao continued to develop, and it became the role of the Sounna to invest the new Askias with their power; although the Askia in theory had absolute power, by this time his rule in practice had to be mediated through the decisions of the Sounna.

Beyond the officials whose titles have already been noted above, there were several key officials who executed the commands of the Askia and the Sounna. Chief among them was the Chancellor, or secretary to the Askia, who was in charge of diplomatic correspondence and executing imperial law. In addition to overseeing royal estates, the Fari mondiyo was responsible for collecting the harvests from the empire and distributing grain to the poor. Meanwhile, the Kalissi-farma was the treasurer of the Askia, while the Korei-farma was in charge of relations with Arab traders.

Surrounded by this array of titleholders, the Askias were able to govern the large empire that Songhay had become, and they did so efficiently through much of the 16th century. Taxes came in to the empire in the form of tithes of harvests and livestock, while there were business taxes paid on merchandise imported through frontier

towns to the north. At Taghāza, the major salt mine in the Sahara, one official was there to charge taxes on the salt imports, while another handled goods imported or exported by canoe along the Niger. All the markets of the empire were frequented by tax collectors of the Askia, meaning that the income base of the empire was sound and growing with the prosperity of the 16th century.

An important aspect facilitating the growth of Songhay's administrative apparatus was Askia Mohammed's alliance with the Ulemas of Timbuktu. This increased the prevalence and importance of literacy among the ruling classes, and allowed for greater control of revenues and spending. Thus it was in the period of the Askias that the administrative foundations were laid to consolidate the territorial gains that had first been made by Sonni Ali. As the role of Islam and literacy grew, so too did the importance of Timbuktu, which saw something of a golden age as the 16th century waxed and waned, and Songhay with it.

Importance of Timbuktu as a Centre of Learning; Role of Lawyers and Clerics in Sharīa; the economy (including gold, salt, agriculture, trade, slavery, taxation)

Timbuktu gained fame in the Western world through the 17th and 18th centuries as a centre of unparalleled riches and learning. In truth its heyday was during the 16th century, when it lay at the heart of the Songhay empire; after the fall of Songhay to the Moroccan army which invaded in 1591, Timbuktu never again gained quite the height of its prestige and reputation that it had previously known. Nevertheless, the tradition of learning and knowledge remained, and the ideas and discourses developed by scholars from Timbuktu would be very important in the rise of Islamic reformist movements in the 18th century in a region stretching from Senegal in the west to the north of Nigeria in the east.

Al Sa'dī tells us that Timbuktu was founded circa 1100 by the Tuareg who came from the deserts to the north of the settlement on the Niger. They used to come with their herds to graze at this site during the dry season, when water was scarce elsewhere; once the rains came, they would return to the north. By and by the Tuareg made the camp their depot for belongings and provisions, and it came to be a commercial crossroads. As Al-Sa'dī puts it, "the cream of scholars and holymen, and the wealthy from every tribe settled there – men from Egypt, Awjila, Fezzan, Ghadames, Tuwāt, Dar'a, Tafilalt, [and] Fez". By 1325, at the time of Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca, the great mosque of Jinjeregber was being constructed, and Timbuktu was well on the way to its great position in the Sahel.

Timbuktu accepted Mali's rule in 1336, recognising the power which had come following Mansa Musa's pilgrimage, and his status in the Islamic worlds across the Sahara. The 14th century saw a period of pronounced expansion, and by the 1380s the city had well-built houses spaced out from one another, armed camps to the north and east to protect it from raiders, and Jinjeregber had been completed. However, when Mali began to weaken in the early 15th century, the city was seized by the Tuareg in 1433-4, and they ruled it for 35 years until it fell to the Songhay under Sonni Ali. As we have seen, this was a period of expansion by Songhay towards the West, and Timbuktu was well placed to take advantage of the growth in trade and resources which followed, being situated further to the east than was Gao (the capital of Songhay). This facilitated Timbuktu's power in the later 15th and 16th centuries, as the city entered its golden age. However in 1591, when the Moroccan invasion destroyed Songhay's power, the Sultan of Morocco, Mūlāy Ahmad al-Dharabī, took control of the city.

Thus it was in the 16th century that Timbuktu reached its heights of independence. There was a governor, the *Timbuktu-koi*, appointed directly by the Askia, a dedicated tax collector, and a military commander based at nearby Kabara. Its reputation as a centre of learning and its connections to the centres of the Islamic world through networks of transnational scholars shielded the city from

arbitrary exactions made by Songhay officials, and helped to preserve its strength. A centre of learning and trade, Timbuktu became the hub of the Songhay empire which it could barely do without.

Understanding Timbuktu's strength involves a grasp of the key links between Islam and long-distance commerce throughout West Africa in this period. As scholars such as Paul Lovejoy and Paulo Farias have demonstrated, part of Islam's power in West Africa came through its appearance as a vehicle for the transmission of the material goods that were traded across the Sahara from centres of power and learning such as Cairo and Fez. Islam became a transnational religion of trade, and in order to become part of the commercial network conversion to Islam – the religion of the long-distance traders – was usually necessary. Thus, as Timbuktu's reputation as a centre of learning grew, so did its importance to Songhay's trading networks; Islamic scholars moved frequently across the desert, and with them went the desired material goods which oiled the wheels of the desert trades.

The transnational links of the Islamic scholars of Timbuktu were far too many to enumerate here. Mansa Musa returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca with an Egyptian scholar, Sidi Abderrahman et Temini, who was said to have declared that the scholars were much better versed in the knowledge of the Qu'ran than he was; while in the 15th century, Kateb Moussa, the imam of the great mosque of Timbuktu (1422-62) studied in Fez in Morocco. As was noted by the historian of Songhay and Timbuktu, Sékéné Mody Cissoko, the markets of the Songhay empire were frequented by traders and scholars from Morocco, which immediately made the Merinid dynasty of Fez the focal point of attraction for scholars from the Sahel.

Al Sa'dī lists an impressive range of scholars from Timbuktu who studied and travelled to places as far apart as Katsina (Nigeria), Marrakesh (Morocco), Mecca and Medina (Saudi Arabia). To give an idea of the frequency of these exchanges, we can take his description of the life of the scholar Abū 'Abd Allāh Muhammad ("the bare-headed"), who died in 1618. Said Al Sa'dī: "His most frequent visitors were members of the Moroccan ruling elite – the pashas and those beneath them – and passing nomadic Arabs, because of the abundant *Baraka* (charity) they perceived in him".

Such intellectual links were closely connected to the commercial links that helped Songhay to consolidate the administrative and political power that we have already seen developing during the 16th century. As Cissoko describes, the Songhay empire had impressive long-distance connections by the time of the 16th century. To the north and east, the main axis was through the capital



Gao, from which Songhay supplied Tripoli in Libya and Cairo in Egypt. Another major axis ran through Timbuktu and was fuelled by the gold trade: this saw gold mined in the forests of what is now Ghana, traded north to the city of Djenné, and from here to Timbuktu and then north-west to Morocco and Ceuta, Fez, Marrakesh, and Oran. Finally, trade directly north flowed via the oasis settlement of Touât – in what is now Algeria – to the region that was known as Ifriqiya.

Trade was rich and diverse. Slavery was important, and the Portuguese historian Vitorino Magalhães Godinho estimated that by the 15th century the slave trade from Songhay to North Africa was in the region of 800-1000 enslaved persons annually. But the real motor of trade was gold, with the empires of the Niger known as the “land of gold” to Arab scholars. Alongside gold and slaves, the products of the lands south of the Sudan were traded: weavers, tailors, and ironsmiths all made products that travelled north across the desert wastes alongside the scholars, gold, and slaves.

The practice of slavery was certainly an important part of the Songhay imperial economic system. When Askia Mohammed asked the jurist Al-Maghīlī for advice as to the ruling of his empire (c. 1500), he noted that one practice commonly found was that “some will sell a slavegirl and the purchaser will take possession of her without caring whether or not she is already pregnant. Then, if it becomes apparent that she is pregnant they quarrel over the offspring. This happens very frequently.” The rise of slavery was necessary to harness the agricultural potential of the empire, to feed the troops, and to supply grain to the growing urban areas. Thus the consolidation of the empire and its administrative apparatus went with an increase in unfreedom and the growth of discontent and discord. This was to have serious consequences once Songhay’s existence became threatened, in part through these growing transnational connections, towards the end of the 16th century.

Reasons for decline of the Songhay Empire, particularly succession crises; Civil War of succession and Moroccan Invasion (1591)

Songhay’s power started out, as we have seen, under Sonni Ali, who was a king whose adherence to Islam went with his continued openness to the religious practices of his ancestors. Askia Mohammed described in his letters to Al-Maghīlī how “there are some among them who claim to have some knowledge of the future through sand divining and the like, or through the disposition of the stars, information gathered from djinns or the sounds and



Mulay Ahmed c.1535

movements of birds and so on. Some assert that they can write [talismans] to bring good fortune, such as material prosperity or love, and to ward off ill fortune by defeating enemies, preventing steel from cutting and poison from taking effect, and [they make] other similar claims and perform actions such as magicians are wont to do”.

Under Sonni Ali, therefore, the actions linked to longstanding African religious and ritual practice were not clamped down upon. With the new Askia dynasty, however, and the increasing importance of Timbuktu and the Ulemas, such practices were frowned upon. As the historian Bruce Hall has shown, it was also in the 16th and 17th centuries that new legal discourses were developed in Timbuktu which differentiated discriminatorily according to colour. The bidān (white) were favoured by this discourse, as closer to the Book, while the sudān (black) found themselves facing legal discrimination.

The political powers of Islamic law therefore grew through the 16th century, along with the power of the scholars and the place of Timbuktu in the Songhay empire. Islamic

law in the empire was run from Timbuktu, where the qadi (judge) was the fountainhead of Islamic law. The qadi had various auxiliaries, including jurists (mufti) and secretaries. Most of the cases which he heard related to business and inheritance disputes, and given the importance of trade to Timbuktu the qadi was the most important magistrate

of the city. Clearly, this was something which made the place of Islamic law and scholarship ever more important in the political discourses of the Songhay empire; indeed, it was this which required the transnational connections to the learning centres of Morocco which we saw in the previous section.

These connections were important to Songhay's place in the world and its sense of autonomy and power. However, as the 16th century unwound, tensions grew. Many of these were linked to the different factions which arose as the empire grew, and more and more peoples were incorporated into it. There was an episode of major factionalism and succession crises in the 1530s, following the reign of Askia Mohammed, with 3 shortlived Askias: Moussa (1528-31), Mohammed II Benkan Kiriai (1531-7) and Ismail (1537-9). These were calmed during the long reign of Askia Dawud (1549-82), as we saw above, but after Dawud's death the succession rises returned and the period from 1586-88 saw a series of civil wars between rival factions for the crown.

Why, then, was there such a strong tension in Songhay when it came to succession? There were perhaps two core reasons. The heterogynous nature of the Songhay empire, and the different peoples that lived there, meant that there were always groups vying for control of the empire; and this was something that was perhaps exacerbated by the tension between the growing importance of Timbuktu and the scholars as opposed to the traditional Songhay religious practice. There was, secondly, the overweening power of the Askias as compared to other officials: though there were other important officials, these were often relatives and dependents of the Askia, and the lack of a genuine meritocracy made competition for the kingship title marked.

These civil wars of the succession were temporarily forestalled by the rise to power in 1588 of Askia Ishaq II. However the internal strife had weakened Songhay terminally. Recognising the weakness of a trading power increasingly seen in Fez as subordinate, Mūlāy Ahmed wrote to him from Morocco and asked for the taxes that he paid on the important salt mines of Taghāza to be lifted. When Ishaq II of Songhay refused, Al Sa'dī tells us, he "sent [with his refusal] a reply couched in intemperate language, accompanied by a spear and two iron shoes". Mūlāy Ahmed despatched an army from Morocco which left in November 1590 and arrived on the banks of the Niger river in late February 1591. Battle was formed at Tankondibogho on March 13th, and the Moroccan troops. Al Sa'dī wrote, "broke the army of the askiya in the twinkling of an eye...at the moment of their defeat, the soldiers threw their shields on the ground and sat on

them cross-legged until [the] army came and killed them in cold blood where they were, for it was their custom not to flee when defeated."

Conclusion

For almost 150 years, the undisputed power at the heart of West Africa was constituted by the Songhay empire. At first this was characterised by a political culture which blended African traditions of religion and kingship with those of the Islamic world. As the power of the Songhay empire rose, the importance of Islamic scholars and trade with the Islamic world grew; so too did the commercial and political influence of North African powers in West Africa. When the internal divisions of the Songhay empire became too great, this offered an avenue for the invasion from Morocco, and the destruction of the Songhay empire.

Thereafter no great power controlled the Niger bend for two centuries or more. The area which had been Songhay became ruled by a power known as the Arma, which rapidly grew independent from Morocco. The political elite of the Arma were descended from the Moroccan conquerors, but spoke Songhay; thus Songhay's political culture influenced the governance of the territory for a long period to come; however the reach of the centralised kingship emanating from Gao was never as strong as before.

The transformations of Songhay were part of deep-rooted changes which overtook the Sahel in the period between 1500 and 1800. It was not just the region of Songhay that was affected. As we have seen, Songhay, too, was connected with areas a far flung as Senegal and Nigeria. Sonni Ali himself had been raised in the region of Sokoto (northern Nigeria), prior to taking power in 1464. These were regions governed by trading and intellectual ties, and which had no knowledge of the future boundaries of the postcolonial nation states. Timbuktu remained an important intellectual centre, and the scholars that grew up in the great Hausa cities of northern Nigeria such as Kano and Katsina frequently travelled there for study and learnt from the ulemas in the 17th and 18th centuries.

One such arose in the last decade of the 18th century. Uthman dan Fodio was a Fula scholar from the Sokoto region, who was heavily influenced by scholars from Timbuktu. In the early 19th century he led an Islamic reform movement which transformed the political landscape of northern and central Nigeria, leading to a succession of events which included the fall of the Oyo empire among the Yoruba of southern Nigeria, and the increasing number of Muslim slaves being shipped to the Americas, where they would continue the history of

warfare and resistance in the slave revolts that took place in Brazil and Cuba in the 19th century, as the historian Manuel Barcia Paz has shown.

This was a reform movement led in northern Nigeria, but whose intellectual hinterland took in Timbuktu and, therefore, Songhay. When in the early 1960s, politicians in newly independent Nigeria seriously debated changing the country's name to Songhay, they were therefore paying tribute to the far-reaching influence which that empire had had not only in its own hinterland, but across the whole of West Africa. A centre for transnational trade and learning, and a meeting point for cultures from West Africa and beyond, Songhay had lain down a marker for future directions in West African political structures and economies.

Factbox

- 900s: Gao's power becomes established in Songhay
- 1068: Al Bakri writes that only a Muslim could rule Gao
- 1076: Fall of Ghana empire to the Almoravids
- c. 1100: Timbuktu established
- 1200s: Rise of the Mali Empire
- 1321-24: Mansa Musa of Mali goes on pilgrimage to Mecca
- 1325: Mosque of Jinjereger built at Timbuktu
- 1336: Timbuktu accepts Mali's rule
- Early 1400s: Songhay begins to break away from Mali
- 1433-4: Mali loses control of Timbuktu to the Tuareg
- 1464-92: Sonni Ali's reign
- 1468: Songhay takes Timbuktu
- 1472: Songhay takes Djenné
- 1493: Askia Mohammed takes power of Songhay and inaugurates the Askia title
- 1496-8: Askia Mohammed performs the pilgrimage to Mecca
- 1501 and 1515: Campaigns against Agades (Niger)
- 1505-6: Campaign against Borgu (Nigeria)
- 1514: Annexation of Katsina and Kano (in northern Nigeria)
- 1528: Askia Mohammed deposed by his son
- 1548-82: Reign of Askia Dawud

- 1588-91: Reign of Ishaq II
- 1591: Moroccan invasion of Songhay

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Chapter Two:

The Kingdom of the Kongo, c.1400–c.1709

Kongo power sculptures



The Kingdom of Kongo was long one of the most famous West African kingdoms in the world. From the moment that the Portuguese navigators led by Diogo Cão arrived at the estuary of the Congo river in 1482, the Kongo kingdom embarked on a prolonged engagement with American and European peoples that would endure for centuries. Kongo ambassadors would be despatched to the Vatican to plea for more Catholic missionaries, to Portugal, and to Brazil. The first Bishop of Útica, Dom Henrique, was appointed by the Vatican in 1521, was the son of the king of Kongo, known as the *manikongo*. For all these reasons, and many others, Kongo was in many ways Atlantic Africa's first truly globalised kingdom; its Atlantic global links emerging at around the same time of the growing transnational links of Songhay covered in the previous chapter.

Like many other kingdoms around the world, Kongo's fate was in the end intertwined with its geopolitical manoeuvrings. In the early 17th century, the Kongo kings embarked on a diplomatic offensive with the United Provinces (Dutch Republic), seeking the Republic's assistance in challenging Portuguese trading monopolies and in undoing the growing Portuguese power that had gathered in Angola at the port of Luanda. In the 1640s, this led to a series of military confrontations between the Portuguese and the Kongo/Dutch forces, and in the end the Dutch were defeated and Kongo power suffered a serious blow from which the kingdom never really recovered. After defeat at the Battle of Mbwila in 1665, the Kongo kingdom collapsed into civil wars,

which contributed to a religious revival and the birth of the Antonian movement under Beatriz "Kimpa Vita" in the early 18th century.

For two centuries, therefore, Kongo was a kingdom well-known on the world stage. Radical transformations reshaped the kingdom, bringing new administrative structures, reshaping the relationships of lineages and kinship to political power, and developing radical new religious cults such as Catholicism and then the Antonian movement. Control over political power depended on religious authority, and this is one reason given by historians for the desire of the *Mwissikongo* elite to convert to Christianity and adopt the Catholic church as the state religion; through the *Mwissikongo's* loose ties to the Portuguese royal family and trading networks, this was a cult of worship which the royal family could more easily control.

Kongo's achievements were many. Kongoese religious art remains a testament to the way in which Kongoese religious traditions were incorporated into Catholicism, creating a Kongoese version of Christianity which laid the foundations for the Catholicism of many enslaved Africans in the New World, as the historians Linda Heywood and John Thornton have argued. And yet to many Catholic outsiders, Kongo's practice was deemed heretical. Missionaries in the 17th century lamented their "fetishism" and worship of local shrines; one Portuguese official wrote to the king in 1641 that "if your Majesty is informed that there is Christianity in this kingdom it's a clear trick... because from the first day that they are born they live according to their gentile customs", while the missionary Laurent de Lucques described in 1705 how the people of Kongo were so tired of missionaries that "we were abandoned several times on the path by the porters who fled, leaving us alone with our baggage".

Kongo had therefore globalised and incorporated outside influences, yet Kongo culture remained resolutely Kongoese throughout. This experience of pluralism and cultural retention would stand the societies of West-Central Africa in good stead to retain their vitality when colonialism began almost two centuries later. Postcolonial nations such as Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo grew from a core of a very strong, deep-rooted, and yet globalised peoples and cultures.

Situation in West-Central Africa in c. 1400: Reasons for the Rise of Kongo

When the Portuguese arrived in Kongo in 1482 the kingdom was already well-established. Although there are no written records for the pre-Portuguese period, oral traditions taken down in the 15th and 16th centuries give a good idea of how Kongo had arisen and what the basis of its political authority was.

The capital of Kongo was situated at Mbanza Kongo, later called São Salvador by the Portuguese. Mbanza Kongo lay at the confluence of various trade routes linking the forest and coastal zones, where forest products and coastal products (salt; the shells called *nzimbu* fished at the Island of Luanda) could be exchanged. This may explain why it was chosen as the site of the Kongo capital, although it is worth noting that the city was sited in a natural fortress, on a high plateau above the surrounding region.

Traditions collected in the early 17th century suggested that the ruling clan of Kongo, the *Mwissikongo*, had migrated south across the Congo river, probably at some time in the 14th century, and had then conquered the peoples living there and established the kingdom. Modern historians however have questioned this narrative. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins noted that accounts of “stranger kings” migrating to a new region and forming a kingdom are common to many peoples around the world. John Thornton has suggested that the early Kongo kingdom, probably forged at some time around the late 14th century, was characterised more by federation than conquest. On this account, Kongo kings arrived and forged alliances with provincial rulers in which each guaranteed the succession of the other’s heirs. The different clans were held together by the power of the king of Kongo who was called the *manikongo*. The *manikongo*’s power may have related to the ability to work iron, since many oral traditions associate the founders of Kongo with the blacksmith class, as is also the case in the Angolan kingdom of Ndongo to the south.

The nature of power structures in early Kongo was deeply related to household patterns; a point stressed for the Republic of Guinea by the historian Emily Lynn Osborn. In Kongo, the core of political and household authority was the *kanda*, or lineage. Migration formed a central aspect of how the *kandas* spread their power and built up the alliances which came to constitute the kingdom. With the apparent migration of people across the Congo river, members of one *kanda* migrated and formed alliances with new peoples through marriage. In a pattern familiar to many parts of Africa - such as the Guinea-Bissau region and among the Akan peoples of modern Ghana to the north - descent was principally matrilineal, through the

maternal line; that is, the line of those who were resident in a place when members of the *kandas* appeared and married among them. For this reason of matrilineal descent and inheritance, sons often lived with their maternal uncles. In this way, lineages spread, and so did the political authority at the heart of the federation, which was ruled by the *manikongo*.

This structure of federal power, constructed through expansion of *kandas* and the household alliances which they built, allowed Kongo’s power to stretch very widely prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. Many sources tell us that Kongoese political power was recognised to the north in the kingdom of Loango (now in the modern Republic of Congo) and to the south in Ndongo (the major kingdom found to the east of Luanda in the modern Republic of Angola). This is clear through the fact that the major source of the *nzimbu* shells which constituted Kongo’s core currency was at Luanda, and through the fact that the king of Loango was also given the title *mani*.

By the time that the Portuguese arrived, therefore, a strong core of Kongo culture had been established. Kongo was a deeply hierarchical society, something which the Portuguese recognised and understood. Power was vested in a ruling class, the *Mwissikongo*, and there was a strong division between the *mbanza* (town) and *vata* (village). One 1491 account compared Mbanza Kongo to the Portuguese city of Évora, and so clearly it was already a fully established urban space before the Portuguese arrival. The capital derived its surpluses from the *vata*, whose residents, though sometimes freeborn Kongos, were often members of subordinate and even slave castes.

Kongo’s Imperial Structure: The political, social, military, and economic development of the Kingdom

Kongo’s political organization was far from a static one. At the core of the political development of the kingdom of Kongo was the tension between the traditional lineage structure of households and the kingdom on the one hand, and the growing centralization of the kingdom in the 16th and 17th centuries on the other. It was this antagonism of “lineage against the state”, in the words of the historian António Custódio Gonçalves, which precipitated the civil wars of Kongo in the late 17th century.

Mbanza Kongo was at the heart of political organization of the *Mwissikongo* ruling class. In the late 15th century the city already had a royal palace, a defensive palisade,

and a central plaza where visitors were received and coronations took place. After Afonso I (Mvemba a Nzinga) took power in a civil war against his brother Mpanzu a Kitima in 1509, the city developed rapidly. Afonso asked King Manoel I of Portugal that carpenters and stonemasons be sent to the city, and turned the capital into a stone city. This was in keeping with the imperial expansion of Kongo at the time, and the growing centralization of power structures. Afonso had a wall between 5-7 metres high and almost a metre thick built around the royal quarter and the quarter where the Portuguese lived. Local stonemasons were trained, and by the time the Jesuits arrived in 1548 they were sufficiently numerous to construct three stone churches for them within a few months. The city grew rapidly, and by 1595 the extended urban area around the city encompassed 10,000 households.

In common with many centralized power structures around the world, Kongo's growth in power in the 16th century was accompanied by new political structures. 16th century sources generally present the kingdom as having 6 provinces, each of which was ruled by a governor: Mbamba, Nsoyo, Nsundi, Mpanga, Mbata and Mpemba, with Mbata (in which Mbanza Kongo was located) being the most important. However, by 1607, Cosme Alvares, the Kongo Ambassador to Rome, described the kingdom as consisting of 35 territories including large and small provinces.

This growth was financed by increases in trade, taxation, and central power. There was an increase in tribute (taxation) from the provinces to Mbata through this period, as the urban population grew and required greater provisions to sustain itself. Trade also grew, both with the Portuguese and into the interior of Kongo. There was a famous trade fair held at Malebo Pool (site of the modern cities of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, on the Congo river), at the northern edge of the Kongo kingdom. Here copper was traded from further north, and this also became an important site for the procurement of slaves in the 16th century, as this trade grew from the Kongo port of Mpinda in the province of Nsoyo to the Portuguese sugar plantations on the island of São Tomé. The power of the *Mwissikongo* was also consolidated through the increase of the practise of slavery in Kongo itself, as the historian Linda Heywood has shown; with status increasingly related to slavery and nobility, the *Mwissikongo* became ever more powerful and threatening to the peoples of the surrounding *vatas*.

The 16th century was thus a time both of the development of the power of Kongo, and also when the seeds were sown for the unravelling of that power. The tribute paid by provinces to the centre was made

possible by the *kanda* structure of lineages: labour was organised through the lineages and thus this social model for political organization was what underpinned the expansion of Mbanza Kongo's power. However, at the same time, the centralization of power under the *Mwissikongo* in the 16th century challenged the federal structure which had given rise to the *kanda* system. The historian Ann Hilton wrote that the *Mwissikongo* sought to bypass the political power of the different *kandas*, and this was something that created increased tensions, particularly at a time when the incidence of slavery was increasing among freeborn Kongos – as Afonso I himself had recognised in a letter written to the Portuguese king João III in 1526.

The tensions came to a head in 1568, with the first direct challenge to Kongo's growing authority in the form of invasions of Mbanza Kongo by a group of people called the "*jagas*" by the Portuguese. In the 17th and 18th centuries, "*jaga*" became a generic term to refer to rebellious peoples outside the sphere of Portuguese influence, and historians are generally agreed that the 1568 rebellion was not led by an "ethnicity" of "*jagas*" but rather by a coalition of Kongo peoples unhappy at the changes in the kingdom, and perhaps also at the accession of the new *manikongo* Álvaro I (Nimi a Lukeni lua Mvemba), who took power in 1568. Many of these "*jagas*" may have come from the Kwango river valley, which Hilton suggested had been targets for slave raids by the *Mwissikongo*.

The rise of the slave trade had therefore created a reaction which threatened the survival of the kingdom. The *manikongo*, Álvaro I, was forced to flee, and asked the Portuguese for assistance, and troops were sent from São Tomé. Mbanza Kongo was retaken in 1570, but this placed the *manikongo* in debt to the São Tomé traders, long the most avaricious of the Portuguese slave traders in the kingdom. The São Tomé traders lobbied to establish a trading outpost at Luanda, near the kingdom of Ndongo, where they had been trading illegally for slaves already for several decades. This cemented the separation of Ndongo from Kongo's power, and precipitated the rapid rise in the slave trade from the region. Instability followed, and Kongo's political authority and military power began to wane.

Conversion to Catholicism: Religious Change and Development in the Kingdom of Kongo

When the expedition fleet of Diogo Cão arrived at Kongo in 1482, they returned to Portugal with ambassadors from the kingdom despatched by the *manikongo* Nzinga a

Nkuwu. Once these returned two years later, diplomatic ties were established and conversion began to take place; Nzinga a Nkuwu was baptised and took the name João I. Members of the *Mwissikongo* were despatched to study Catholic doctrine in Portugal, and Catholicism rapidly became an important cult in Kongo.

Conservative adherents to Kongolese religion resisted this process, however, and Nzinga a Nkuwu himself retreated from full-blown Catholicism in the latter part of his reign. One of the principal stumbling blocks was the issue of monogamy. While Catholic writers saw Kongolese resistance to this as grounded in lust and sin, the reasons were fundamental to Kongolese social structure. As Ann Hilton noted, polygamy was deeply connected to the system of state formation through marriage and household alliances of the *kanda*; dispensing with polygamy was thus a fundamental challenge to the social and political world of Kongo, and not something that could be readily accepted. Thus when Nzinga a Nkuwu died in 1506, a conflict developed between conservatives who preferred the Kongolese faith and the Catholic bloc led by Afonso I. After Afonso's triumph in 1509, Catholicism became the state cult for the ruling *Mwissikongo*.

The political role of the new cult rapidly became important in Kongo. The *Mwissikongo* used Catholicism and the access it gave to Portugal as a means of centralizing power, with this religious change thus being a key part of the process of political centralization discussed in the preceding section. Access to the power of Catholicism was a means of accessing political power, and was jealously guarded by the *manikongo*. As the Portuguese chronicler Ruy de Pina described it, once the

manikongo Nzinga a Nkuwu had converted, he received an embassy from "those Lords who had not become Christians, who said to him: Lord, who is our King and all our good, what disservice and treachery have you found in us? How has this helped you to pass us over, unlike those who you have seen fit to become Christians with you?"

The reign of Afonso (1509 – c. 1542/3) then consolidated the Christianity of the elites, and Afonso was unquestionably a devotee of the faith. However, after his death and the accession of Pedro I (Nkanga a Mvemba) in 1542/3 and then Diogo I (Nkumbi a Mpudi) in 1545, things changed. The arrival of Jesuit missionaries in 1548 was not well received in Kongo, as they were less tolerant of the syncretism of Catholicism with existing Kongo religions, which led to repeated tensions and arguments between them and the *manikongo*. Meanwhile, other missionaries and priests despatched to the kingdom were heavily involved in the slave trade and in making personal fortunes, and *manikongos* repeatedly complained about the poor examples that were given. Nevertheless, the political power of the church grew in Kongo, and after the restoration of Álvaro I following the *Jaga* invasions of 1568, priests held a seat on the electoral council for the *manikongo* – a strong indication of the influence and reach of the church in Kongo by the late 16th century.

There was, then, a strong disjunction between the political power and ritual practice of the Catholic church in Kongo by 1600. In political terms, the church was powerful in the choice of Christian successors and in structuring the mixed Kongo-Christian belief structure of the *Mwissikongo*. However the bulk of the Kongo *kandas* retained Kongolese religious practices, and had little to do with Catholicism. In the

Annual Letter of the Jesuits of 1603, it was reported that the Kongolese "were completely finished with good customs and are only Christians by name", and this was something repeatedly claimed through the 17th century. Missionary efforts were revived by the Vatican through the Capuchins from the 1640s onwards, and continued throughout the rest of the 17th century; but the Capuchins repeatedly despaired of the ongoing hold that Kongo religion had in the kingdom.



Why, then, did the *Mwissikongo* convert to Christianity? There was both a spiritual and political dimension to this – two structures which, as the great anthropologist of Kongo Wyatt MacGaffey has noted, are very hard to separate. On the political side, it was important, as the French anthropologist Luc de Heusch noted, that the *Mwissikongo's* status as original outsiders placed limits on their ritual power in Mbanza Kongo. There was a priestly lineage whose leader was known as the *manivunda*, or *mani cabunda*, and the first *manikongos* had had to marry into this lineage to cement their religious authority. By sidestepping the *manivunda* and adopting Catholicism, whose devotees' access to the Church they could control, the *manikongos* rapidly increased their power. This was something that greatly facilitated their centralization of power in the 16th century, and the growing place of status and lineage in Kongo society.

In religious terms, there were also strong reasons for adopting the new faith. As the historian Francisco Bethencourt has noted, the arrival of the Portuguese in the 1480s had strong ritual significance. For the *kanda* of the north of the kingdom, white albinos (*ndundu*) were seen as reincarnations of the ancestors, while in the south they were seen as spirits of the water. Spiritual belief in the intersection of the living and the dead – a key plank of Kongo cosmology – structured the welcoming of the new white (Portuguese) spirits and acceptance of their cult. The spiritual explanation also explains why Kongolese worshippers saw no contradiction between adopting the cult of the new spirits and retaining their old practices: such religious syncretism was a longstanding feature of Kongo religions, and why would the ancestral spirits urge them to give up the practices which gave their presence spiritual meaning?

From the Kongo perspective, therefore, conversion to Christianity did not have to mean abandonment of Kongo religiosity. Such religiosity, grounded in lineage ancestors, and thereby in political and social structures deeply embedded in the Kongo kingdom, was always present even in the worship of the Christian God. When these social and political structures reasserted themselves in the 17th century, as the lineage model challenged the state following the collapse of the Kingdom and defeat at Mbvila, Kongolese religious practice also became central to the Kongo practice of Christianity. The messianic movement led by Beatriz Kimpa Vita in the first decade of the 18th century, at a crisis point of religion and state in Kongo, was therefore the culmination of the complex forces pitting a strong and deep-rooted culture of Kongo against the changes brought on by the influence of Catholicism.

Diplomacy, Expansion, Warfare: Achievements of the Manikongos, Relations with the Portuguese and the Dutch

The *manikongos* who ruled Kongo in the 16th and 17th centuries did so at a time of great global change and instability. The 17th century was a time of climatic instability, with droughts and plagues of locusts afflicting the kingdom along with much of West Africa; this was part of the pattern of the mini ice age which became most acute in the 1640s, precipitating in part the collapse of the Ming Empire in China and the political crises in Britain, France, Portugal and Spain. This climatic instability exacerbated political tensions in West-Central Africa, and contributed to the warfare which led to an increase in the Atlantic slave trade from Kongo and Angola and a demographic collapse in the region. Economically, moreover, Kongo faced rapid inflation of its *nzimbu* shell currency once the Portuguese began to import large numbers of *nzimbu* from their colonies in Brazil.

Such considerations make it clear that the *manikongos* had to navigate Kongo's early globalization at a time of great change and instability. This they sought to do with great skill, and with varying degrees of success. As previously mentioned, diplomatic initiatives were consistent throughout the period. Kongolese ambassadors resided in Portugal from the first, and they were usually high-ranking members of the *Mwissikongo*. Afonso I sent a constant stream of letters to the Portuguese court, requesting assistance in construction and evangelization. In the later part of his reign, too, he protested about the enslavement of freeborn Kongos by slave traders from São Tomé, and requested his own ships to conduct trade on his own account. However the court of the Portuguese king João III (1521-57) were well aware that their advantage lay largely in their control of this technology, and such assistance was never forthcoming.

The groundwork for the political achievements of Kongo were laid in the reign of Afonso I. The growth of the kingdom, expansion of the capital and its trading networks, reach of Kongo culture inland through the trade fairs at Malebo Pool, and the development of administrative officers to govern the provinces, were all advanced through his reign. A literate administrative culture was developed by Afonso which created a stable, strong state at Mbanza Kongo. This was possible in spite of the tension which existed, as already noted, between this model of statecraft and the *kanda* lineage structure which underpinned Kongo households and politics.

Following the death of Afonso, relations between Kongo and Portugal declined. Key was the moment following the restoration of Álvaro I (1568-87) to the throne after

the “jaga” invasion. The role of the São Tomé traders was important in this, and they subsequently successfully lobbied the Portuguese crown to install a captaincy at Luanda – which was established under Paulo Dias de Novais in 1575. This was pivotal, for Luanda – as we have seen – was both the source of the *nzimbu* currency for Kongo and the best place to trade with the kingdom of Ndongo inland. The establishment of the Portuguese settlement at Luanda greatly threatened the power of Kongo, and Álvaro I tried to persuade the Ndongo kings not to accept the Portuguese presence. In 1580 the *ngola* of Ndongo rebelled, but by then it was too late and the Portuguese settlement at Luanda was to be a permanent feature of the region.



The meeting of Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and the Portuguese governor of Luanda in 1622

The 17th century saw the gathering intensity of hostilities between Kongo and Portugal continue. Luanda quickly became a slave-trading base, something which created great instability in Kongo, as raids were made by both Portuguese-led armies and Kongo’s enemies into the kingdom. Kongo therefore sought support through diplomatic and military channels. From around 1610 onwards, the *manikongos* sought an alliance with the Dutch through sending letters sent to the Dutch Republic. The Portuguese were well aware of these manoeuvres, and the first Kongolese-Portuguese war took place in 1622-24 at a time of particular tension between the two; throughout the 1610s, a series of rapacious Portuguese governors at Luanda had despatched military expeditions of horrific violence into Kongo territory with the sole aim of seizing slaves, and it was this which prompted the war.

The Portuguese governor of Luanda, João Correia de Sousa, marshalled his troops to attack, but they were decisively defeated by an army led by Pedro II (Nkanga a Mvika), probably near Mbanda Kasi. The hatred which most Kongolese now felt for the Portuguese was shown by the mass riots against the Portuguese in Kongo which followed; and thereafter Pedro I wrote to the Dutch Republic suggesting a joint land-sea invasion of Luanda. In 1623, the Dutch Republic agreed and sent a fleet to seize both Luanda and the Portuguese colonies of Brazil.

Having seized Salvador da Bahia in north-eastern Brazil, it reached Angola in October 1624 under Piet Heyn. However, by this time Pedro had died, and his successor Garcia I (Mvemba a Nkanga) was more sympathetic to the Portuguese, and refused to cooperate with Piet Heyn.

Nevertheless the events of the 1620s were a foretaste for the tensions between Kongo and Portugal, which grew all the time. Subsequent wars followed with the Portuguese in 1641-3 and 1646-8, after the Dutch had seized Luanda and São Tomé in 1641. Under their new monarch, Garcia II (1641-61), the Kongolese sided with the Dutch, sending ambassadors to their court at Olinda in Brazil. But this was to be their final undoing: a Portuguese army sent from Brazil defeated the Dutch-Kongolese forces in 1648, and the new governors of Angola were Brazilian military leaders who imposed such stiff penalties in the truce that conflict simmered. Garcia II sought diplomatic redress through the Vatican and by resisting the impositions, but this resistance gave an excuse for an attack from Luanda, and his successor António I (Nvita a Nkanga) was decisively defeated by the Portuguese forces at Mbvila in 1665. The defeat of the Mwissikongo was so total that 98 titular (lineage) heads were killed.

In spite of this difficult diplomatic and military situation, there was much to admire in the Court of Garcia II, even at a time when Kongo was beset with difficulties. Garcia’s Kongolese surname was *Ncanga a Luguini nzenze antumba*, and his court matched Kongolese custom with opulence of imported goods from the Atlantic trade. When the missionary Joseph Pellicer de Tovar reached his court in 1649, he described how “the King was in his Chapel, where he had listened to Mass, dressed in all his Finery, with Brocade and gold, his clothes sewn with Pearls and other extremely valuable Jewels. On his head was a Hat which formed part of his Royal Crown, all embossed with the thickest pearls and Stones of unthinkable value. His seat was a Chair [probably a stool], made in the manner of the Country, of velvet and Crimson, and at his Feet a very wide Carpet with some Cushions also made of the same Crimson”.

When one looks also at the portraits of the Kongolese ambassadors to the Dutch court in Brazil by the Dutch artist Albert Eckhout, it is clear that the finery of the European court was a key aspect of how Kongo presented itself diplomatically to the world. At the same time, aspects of Kongo iconography and style were there in the royal stool and the use of ivory. Two centuries of intense trade and cultural connection had brought much pomp and power to the *manikongos*, but as the 17th century continued they would find it increasingly hard to maintain it in the face of the political crises brought on by global geopolitical conflicts and the local tension which the centralization of

power had brought with it. Following the defeats to the Portuguese in 1648 and 1665, the kingdom degenerated into a series of civil conflicts which created the context for the rise of the messianic movement of Antonianism in the first decade of the 18th century, where the Kongo people worshipped Beatriz Kimpa Vita as an Antonine saint.



Miguel de Castro, envoyée from the Kingdom of Kongo - painting by Albert Eckhout

Commerce and Slavery: Civil War, Decentralization, and the Place of Kongo in the 18th Century

Kongo's international trade was not at first structured through the slavery. Copper and cloths woven in Kongo were important, and even in the early 17th century the latter formed the bulk of the kingdoms' exports. As in many other parts of West and West-Central Africa such as Kano and Senegambia, cloth-weaving was one of the most important industries, with cloths signs of status and used also in important ritual events such as funerals.

Nevertheless, with the rise in the practice of domestic slavery and the increase in the export slave trade from the region, the place of slavery and the slave trade became central, especially after the settlement of Luanda in 1575. The slave trade from the region exploded in this era, and enslaved Africans from West-Central Africa formed a majority of those going to the Americas in the first half of the 17th century. The trans-Atlantic slave trade database www.slavevoyages.org contains important information on this process, which had serious impacts on Kongo society.

Domestically, the major impact of the increase in slavery and the slave trade was in the mode of production. As the historian John Thornton has shown, the rise of the centres of Mbanza Kongo and of Mbanza Nsoyo (the capital city of the coastal province of Nsoyo where European ships arrived to trade) led to a consolidation of the slave mode of production. Agricultural surpluses were required to feed the growing populations of the urban centres, and this was achieved through centralizing power and increasing the incidence of slavery. This in turn precipitated unrest and division, contributing to the "jaga" attack on Mbanza ongo in 1568 and the civil wars which beset Kongo after 1665.

A further impact of the slave trade may also have been on the lineage structure of Kongo society. Wyatt MacGaffey argued that slavery encouraged matrilineality as a means of acquiring women and expanding the lineage, where war and slavery tended to shrink it. The increasing importance of matrilineal systems may have grown along with slavery, contributing to the capacity of the lineage system to challenge the centralized state, as occurred in the later 17th century. Social structures thus, far from being "static" and "unchanging" as previous generations of European historians imagined was the case for West Africa, were in a state of constant transformation, as local frameworks interacted with global forces.

With the climate of insecurity growing all the time in the era of slavery, warfare, and ecological instability, there was also a massive demographic and human impact. People fled from villages which had been sited near main roads for fear of raiding parties, and lived high on inaccessible mountains or deep in the bush. The roads of Kongo became increasingly overgrown, dwarfed by elephant grass growing several metres high, beset by attacks by lions and other wild animals. Missionaries reported meeting trains of refugees of women and children fleeing the instability, as villages were abandoned. The missionary Antonio Teruel described the situation thus in the northern province of Nsundi in the late 1650s: "On the first day I stopped at a large village, well inhabited two months before when I passed through it, with many residents, but now deserted; they had all abandoned it, leaving a few harvested fruits lying on the ground. The cause of this was (as I heard from those who accompanied me) the coming of the Duke to the town, fearing the extortions of his servants and slaves".

The centralized system had created many noteworthy achievements, but the disproportionate power of the *manikongos* had also led to widespread resistance and reassertion of federal and decentralized Kongolese values. Once the core of the *Mwissikongo* aristocracy had been killed at Mbwila, the lineages were ready to fight back. The Kimpanzu, supported by the princes of Nsoyo,

controlled the areas to the west by the Atlantic, while their rivals the Kinlaza had bases to the north and east. Both groups struggled to gain control of Mbanza Kongo, and fought repeatedly in the city, which was sacked in 1668 and again by the Kinlaza pretender Pedro III in 1678. Thereafter Mbanza Kongo was abandoned and elephants moved in to eat the fruits of the abandoned trees.

Many voices give us a sense of the desolation of Kongo at this time. By 1680, the chronicler António de Cadornega described how Mbanza Kongo was “abandoned by the Court and its inhabitants, with just the Hospice of the Italian Capuchins and Apostolic Missionaries remaining there”. A royal official in Luanda described the city in November 1684 as “completely ruined and depopulated”. Both the city and the kingdom had been turned into a “Den of Thieves and Robbers”, an Italian missionary claimed in 1682.

Battles raged throughout the rest of the 17th century, fought by both Kinlaza and Kimpanzu, and a third group known as the *aguas rosadas* who were formed by descendants of both. It was only in 1705 that Mbanza Kongo was reoccupied as a spiritual centre by Beatriz Kimpa Vita and her followers. However the political centrality of the city had gone, and Kongo’s state fragmented into competing rival Mbanzas, who raided one another for spoils and captives, who could be sold to the Europeans on the Atlantic coast and thereby into the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Conclusion

Writing in 1649, Joseph Pellicer de Tovar gave a graphic description of the abandonment of the royal roads of Kongo: “Aside from the continuous climbs and descents of extremely steep Mountains and the [requirement to] wade through an infinity of Rivers, the paths are so very narrow that one person can barely pass along them. On top of this they are surrounded on all sides by Canes and Grasses which are extremely thin and taller than a Man, all of which lean in towards the same Path; so far that they Cover the Royal Road so completely that there is no room for the Feet or the Eyes”.

The trajectory of the Kingdom of Kongo was in keeping with the abandonment of the roads by the subjects. At first a kingdom founded on lineage alliance, power-sharing, and the place of religion in political authority, the rise of trade with the Europeans had centralized power and authority and led to resistance from the Kongolese. The lineage system, strengthened by the impact of slavery, reasserted itself as the kingdom weakened through growing pressure from outside. By the time

that missionaries reappeared in the region in the 19th century, the presence of Christianity was deemed so tenuous as to be almost invisible.

Kongo’s history in relation to European trade is one therefore of oppression, resistance, and reassertion. The demands of the slave trade provoked warfare, autocracy and increased hierarchies in the kingdom. But the centralizing process could not sustain itself, and Kongolese religious and lineage values reasserted themselves when the kingdom collapsed. By this time, Kongo peoples had been globalised, and their struggles from then on had a global dimension, as more and more Kongo peoples were sold into the Atlantic slave trade, procured in the raids which the now smaller kingdoms made on one another. Yet the military and social struggles of Kongo peoples were not entirely in vain, and historians such as Laurent Dubois and John Thornton see the military skills they learnt in the Kongo wars as contributing factors to the success of slave revolutions in Haiti, and the revolutions of the Americas that led in time to the abolition of the slave trade.

Factbox

- c. 1350s-1400: Formation of Kingdom of Kongo at Mbanza Kongo
- 1482: Arrival of Portuguese fleet under Diogo Cão; ambassadors return to Lisbon and two years later the manikongo Nzinga a Nkuwu accepts baptism.
- 1506-9: Civil war between pro- and anti-Christian pretenders to the throne – Afonso I the Christian candidate wins out in 1509
- 1542: Afonso dies and is succeeded by Pedro I
- 1545: Pedro I is succeeded by Diogo I; relations deteriorate with the Portuguese.
- 1548: Jesuit missions arrive in Mbanza Kongo and create a rift
- 1568: Álvaro I accedes to the throne – “Jaga” invade and drive him out of the city.
- 1570: Álvaro I restored to the throne with help of the Portuguese from São Tomé
- 1575: Formation of Luanda and relations between Portuguese and Ndongo
- 1580-90: War between Portuguese and Ndongo
- 1609: First Kongo embassies to Dutch

- 1622-24: First Kongo-Portuguese war; Pedro I defeats the Portuguese in 1622 and seeks alliance with Dutch
- 1624: Pedro's successor Garcia I is more pro-Portuguese and refuses Dutch alliance
- 1630s: Tensions grow again between Luanda and Kongo
- 1641: Dutch seize Luanda and São Tomé and form alliance with Kongo
- 1648: Dutch defeated by the Portuguese with a fleet sent from Brazil; Kongo forced to accept harsh peace terms
- 1650s: Portuguese governors at Luanda all come from military commanders in Brazil where they repeat harsh policies developed there against the Native American populations
- 1665: Kongolese army destroyed at Battle of Mbwila – civil war begins
- 1668 and 1678: Mbanza Kongo sacked by rival factions and thereafter abandoned
- 1705: Mbanza Kongo reclaimed by Beatriz Kimpa Vita, the "Kongolese Saint Anthony" and re-established as a religious centre. Kongo's central kingdom has by now fragmented into rival statelets.

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Chapter Three:

The Kingdoms and empires of Oyo and Dahomey, c.1608–c.1800

In April 1797, the Brazilian priest Father Vicente Pires was greeted by the Avogá or Yovogan, the chief officer of the Kingdom of Dahomey, near the port of the kingdom at Glehue. Pires described later how they toasted each other's health with good wine, and that the Yovogan appeared "mounted bareback on a horse with a small cloth in place of a saddle, covered by a large Sunhat . . . Surrounding him were various footsoldiers carrying different local musical instruments. Going in another circle around him came other soldiers carrying rifles, intermingling with various others bearing cloths of multiple colours, raised on small sticks, which they call flags".

By 1797, Dahomey had for 70 years been one of the most powerful kingdoms in the region of the modern West African countries of Benin, Togo, and south-western Nigeria. This region was known to Europeans as "the slave coast", but Pires's description shows that the kingdom of Dahomey had developed administrative apparatus and

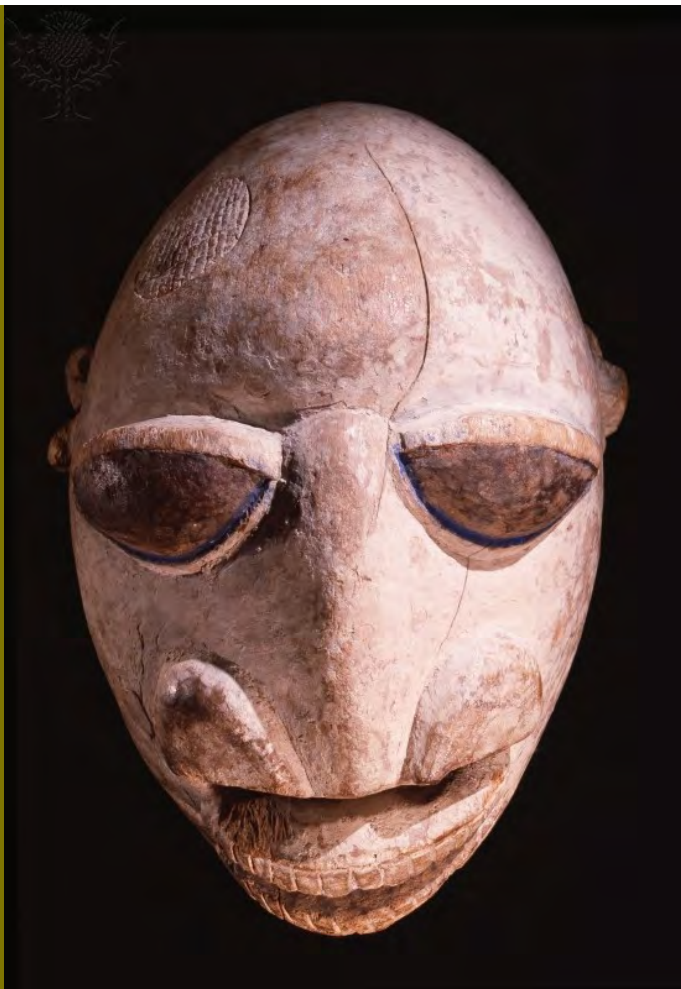
regalia which went far beyond the slave trade. Unlike Songhay which traded just with North Africa and Kongo which traded just with Atlantic powers, Dahomey had commercial links both with European traders and with Arab merchants who traded north across the Sahara to Cairo in Egypt and Tripoli in Libya; nearer by, to the North-east, was the kingdom of Oyo, even more powerful than Dahomey and to which Dahomey was tributary for the second half of the 18th century. The way in which Dahomey saw Oyo's strength was conveyed by the English slave trader Robert Norris:

"The Dahomans, to give an idea of the strength of the Eyo army, assert, that when they go to war, the general spreads the hide of a buffaloe before the door of his tent, and pitches a spear in the ground, on each side of it; between which the soldiers march, until the multitude, which pass over the hide, have worn an hole through it; as soon as this happens he presumes that his forces are numerous enough to take the field."

Dahomey paid tribute to Oyo for many decades in the 18th century, but at the same time was feared by surrounding smaller kingdoms. Its access to European trade and its dominance over the kingdoms of Allada and Hueda made the port of Ouidah the major trading port in the whole region throughout the 18th century. For Oyo, meanwhile, trading access to the coast often required mediation through Dahomeyan territory. Customs and beliefs of the two kingdoms became intertwined, through their shared interests in trade, and their intermediary position between trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan commerce. Moreover, customs and beliefs in one influenced the other, which is why it is appropriate to look at them together.

Situation in West Africa to c. 1600; Geography of Dahomey and Oyo

The kingdoms of Dahomey and Oyo were located straddling the border of what are today Benin and Nigeria. Each was situated some distance inland from the Atlantic ocean, in savannah grasslands which facilitated agriculture, mobility, and the development of state infrastructures of taxation, transport and military control. Moreover, each was protected from coastal raids by geographical features.



Gelede mask with exaggerated features from Oyo

In Dahomey, this protection was afforded by the Mahi swamplands and forests. Dahomey's kings sought to keep this land wild, and when Robert Norris crossed it in the early 1770s, he described the "path as so narrow, crooked and bad, that it is impossible to be carried in a hammock... the roaring of wild beasts, and the crashing and rustling of elephants in the underwood, formed the most horrid discord that could be conceived". In Oyo, the heartland of Oyo lay in the savannah, protected from the coast by the thick forests which stretched north of the lagoon at Lagos.



Both Dahomey and Oyo had arisen from among peoples and smaller states that had coalesced in this region since the 14th century. Oyo was a Yoruba kingdom, with the Yoruba people being the most populous people of southern Nigeria; and in common with most Yoruba kingdoms its origins went back to the 14th century if not before. Yoruba kingdoms claim an origin at the city of Ile-Ife, the spiritual heartland of Yoruba peoples. Oyo was said to have been founded by Oranmiyan, one of the sons of Oduduwa who dispersed from Ile-Ife. Migrants then appeared from the kingdoms of Borgu and Nupe further north, each situated between the Hausa kingdoms around the city of Kano and the Yoruba heartlands to the south.

These were kingdoms which traded with the trans-Saharan Arab merchants, and Nupe was also a major cloth-producer. In the 16th century Nupe united as a kingdom, and fought with Oyo for supremacy in the region of what is now south-central Nigeria. Nupe invaders crossed the Niger river in the early 16th century and sacked the Oyo capital at Oyo-Ile, founding many towns in the northern part of what would become the kingdom of Oyo. However by 1600 Oyo had checked the Nupe advance and was becoming the regional powerhouse.

Dahomey's rise occurred later than that of Oyo, in the early 18th century. During the 17th century, the major kingdom in the region of what is now southern Benin was that of Allada, a kingdom of Ajá people who had also borrowed many Yoruba traditions. Allada was a major trading partner of Europeans, selling cloth, ivory, and enslaved Africans to Dutch, French and Portuguese traders. Atlantic trade in Allada was underway by the 1580s, and there was heavy connection to the Portuguese settlement on the island of São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea. By the 1660s, however, Allada was weakening as the growth of trade saw the king of Hueda (Whydah) becoming more powerful. The king of Allada sent embassies to Spain in 1658 and France in 1670, but to no avail. In the early 1680s European traders moved their forts to Hueda: the Dutch in 1682, the English in 1683, and the Brandenburgers in 1684.

Dahomey, meanwhile, was still a small kingdom, having been founded between 1620 and 1650. But when the Europeans signed a 6-clause convention with Whydah in 1704, recognising it as an international neutral port, and Whydah's internal strength then began to weaken, Agaja, king of Dahomey seized his chance; under his leadership, Dahomey conquered Allada in 1724 and Whydah in 1727, becoming at once the most powerful kingdom in the region.

Rise of Oyo and Dahomey: Relations Between the Kingdoms and their Military Power

Oyo rose earlier than Dahomey in part through the greater longevity of the Yoruba commonwealth of kingdoms, which had already had cultural and political influences among the Ajá peoples who gave rise to Dahomey. But also important was its access to cavalry, and the terrain and geographical location in which the cavalry operated.

Oyo kings were known as *Alafins*. The *Alafin* of Oyo who reconquered Oyo-Ile from Nupe was Abipa. Abipa reigned in the early 17th century, and his use of cavalry was decisive in the recapture of Oyo-Ile. Oyo's geographical location gave it access to horses imported by Arab traders from the north (in common with the Jolof kingdom further west, in Senegambia). Geography was also important in another way, since the savannah country to the south-west of Oyo-Ile was ideal territory for the use of cavalry. Oyo's cavalry is reported as in widespread use in battles against Allada (1698) and Dahomey (1720s), and is seen as likely to have influenced their triumph over Nupe in this earlier period. The importance of Oyo's cavalry is

expressed in the following Yoruba proverb, as noted by the historian Robin Law in his important work on Oyo:

A ki i ba onwe jagun odo

One cannot beat a warrior who is a swimmer in the river,

Tana i ba ẹlẹ sin jagun papa?

Who shall beat a warrior who is a horseman in the plain?

Warfare depended on the use of horses, and on the Oyo ironsmiths and the weapons which they made. Cavalrymen carried two or three spears, either the thrusting-spear called the *okọ* or the javelin called the *esin*. However in this phase of Oyo's power, European muskets were never used: in 1726 it was said that Oyo's cavalry had run into problems in Dahomey owing to the unfamiliar noise of firearms. Alongside the cavalry were archers on foot and royal *ilari* slaves, who were governed by 70 *Eso* war chiefs. Foot soldiers were supplied by provincial commanders, all of whom served under the *Are Ona Kakango*, the Commander-in-Chief. The whole made an impressive military force, and the complex structure and different types of warriors make it clear why Oyo was powerful for so long.

The *Alafin* who led Oyo's conquest of Dahomey was Ojigi. This occurred in 1726-30, just as Dahomey had completed its conquest of Allada and Whydah. Dahomey's conquest of the coast threatened Oyo's commercial interests with European traders, and Oyo insisted on annual tribute after 1730. However, Agaja of Dahomey resisted this until his death in 1740; thereafter Oyo invaded Dahomey twice, in the dry seasons of 1742 and 1748, and Agaja's successor Tegbesu bowed to the tribute demand. The annual tribute paid by Dahomey to Oyo consisted of large payments of slaves, gunpowder corals and cowrie shells – the main form of money in use in the region. Gifts were also sent from Dahomey at the installation of each new Oyo *Alafin*, and when Tegbesu's successor Kpengla expelled all followers from Dahomey, he spared those from Oyo.

For Dahomey, the invasion from Oyo occurred just at the time when they had cemented their power among neighbouring kingdoms. Agaja was without question the most important king in Dahomey's history, leading the conquest of Allada and Whydah. With a military power built on accumulating large numbers of followers, and dominating opponents through both numbers and perceived spiritual power, Agaja and Dahomey's power grew rapidly. He had acceded the throne from his brother Akaba in 1708, and was described by a French observer in 1728 as middling in height, full-bodied, "slightly bigger and having wider shoulders than Molière".

After the truce with Oyo in 1730, Agaja agreed to the slave trade renewing in the ports, and in 1733 established the

Yovogan position to deal with matters of the European slave trade. After Tegbesu succeeded Agaja in 1740, the Dahomeyan position was consolidated; Tegbesu's successor, Kpengla (1774-89) consolidated the military and improved Dahomey's access to the slave trade, and after the weak rule of Agonglo (1789-97), Adandozan (1797-1818) sought to strengthen Dahomey's position in the early 19th century. Adanadozan sent embassies to Brazil and strengthened Dahomey's regional power. After his death, in 1823, tribute ceased to Oyo. This strong position was something that then continued throughout the 19th century, until the rise of European colonialism.

Political, Social, Military and Economic Nature and Development of Oyo and Dahomey

Power operated quite differently in Oyo and Dahomey. In Oyo, there was a federal system of power and frequent power struggles between the *Alafins* and councillors; indeed, the majority of Oyo *Alafins* from 1700 onwards did not die of natural causes. In Dahomey, however, the king's power was absolute. Symbolic of this was the account of a late-18th century observer, who said that no one was permitted to build a house with more than one storey except for the king and the Europeans; the king of Dahomey held absolute power over royal appointments and trade, and this continued on into the 19th century.

Oyo's power grew from the city of Oyo-Ile, with the city the foundational power structure among Yoruba peoples. There were a number of such city states in the kingdom of Oyo, all of which recognised the supreme power of the capital city. In Oyo, both land and chiefly titles were the property of a lineage; in the city of Oyo-Ile, chiefs represented thereby component lineages of the kingdom. There were three principal royal wards, *Aremo*, *Ona Isokun* and *Baba Ijayi*. The advisory council to the *Alafin* consisted of seven principal chiefs, the *Oyo Mesi*; much of the political history of Oyo in the 18th century involved jockeying for power between the *Alafins* and the *Oyo Mesi*.

The head of the *Oyo Mesi* was called the *Basorun*, and there were six further chiefs: in order of rank, these were the *Agbakin*, the *Samu*, the *Alapini*, the *Laguna*, the *Akiniku*, and the *Asipa*. These chiefs had political and also religious roles, often serving as heads of particular shrines; but they also controlled the metropolitan military organization, and therefore wielded considerable actual power. The *Alafin* could only be installed with their approval, and several times this was withheld; in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, there was a succession of nine *Alafins* whose reigns ended in deposition or assassination. In the 1730s, they rejected Ojigi, and in 1754

the Basorun Gaha himself seized power. Gaha was only overthrown in 1774 by the *Alafin* Abiodun, with the help of provincial forces.

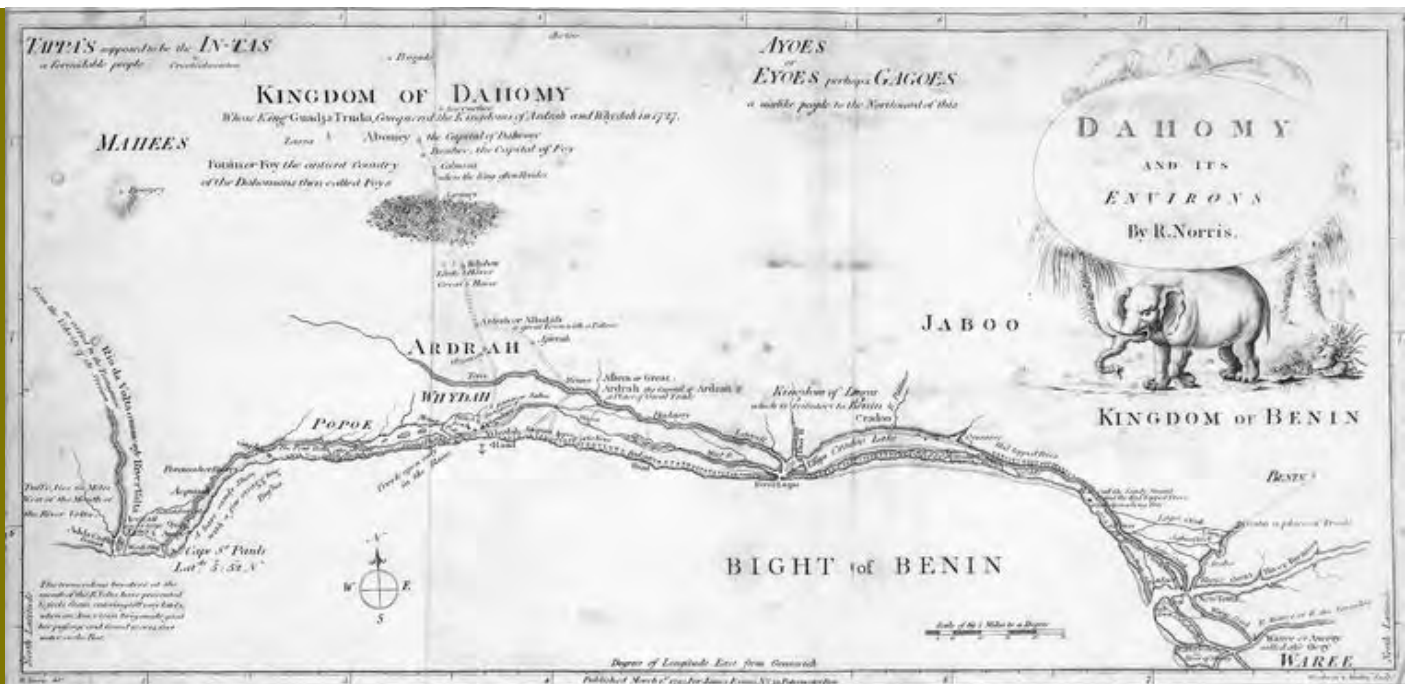
The conflict between the *Oyo Mesi* and the *Alafin* represented struggles over a growing centralization of power in the 18th century. This period saw the *Alafin* install personal representatives in provincial towns, the *ajele*. Agents of the *Alafin* began to collect local taxes, and some fiefs were granted to senior palace officials instead of non-royal chiefs. All of this was in opposition to the more traditional federal model of power which had predominated in Oyo before this. The power of the *Oyo Mesi* was testament both to the strength of this decentralized system, and the challenges it faced in the 1700s; these challenges emerged through going state power, developing with rising access to resources for elites through international trade, with the elites seeking to control access to these resources through centralization of power. It is clear therefore that there are some structural similarities between political tensions in Kongo (as observed in the last chapter) and Oyo in this period.

Economically, both Oyo and Dahomey were far from being subsistence economies. There were sophisticated markets and trade networks, and much manufacturing took place in Oyo. Craft production was widespread, especially in urban areas, and most urban peoples bought their food by purchase; cowries were the major currency in use. Oyo cloth was well-regarded in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Ijebu, Oyo-Ile and Ila were all famous weaving centres; indeed, Oyo-Ile had 500-600 acres of indigo cultivated for dyes. Norris described how the gifts of the *Alafins* usually came as "a large cotton cloth, manufactured in the *Eyo* country, of excellent workmanship". In common with many large-scale pre-

industrial societies, much of the agricultural labour which went into these industries was performed by slaves.

Dahomey was also a highly mercantile kingdom, with good roads and bridges facilitating trade; trade along with military expansion and centralization of power were pillars of Dahomeyan power. An 18th century visitor described how the capital city, Abomey, hosted markets every day of the week with crafts and foods for sale, as well as luxury items such as tobacco and cloth. On top of this, there were markets in different towns of the kingdom every day: on Sundays at Abomey; on Mondays at Canamina; on Tuesdays at Zobadó; on Wednesdays at Mioquí; on Thursdays at Zingó; on Fridays at Adoguí; and on Saturdays at Agonán. These markets were administered by an official called the Migan, who had a retinue of 100 soldiers in case of disputes; he was in charge of overseeing national trade in Dahomey, whereas the Yovogan dealt with international trade. Much of the produce for the markets of Dahomey was grown locally, and visitors described a highly cultivated landscape, where yams, potatoes and corn were all grown.

In Dahomey, as in Oyo, slavery was connected both increasingly to agricultural production and to social organization. The historian Edna Bay describes how there were three main levels of kinship organization: the clan, the lineage, and the household. Kinship was a central part of state control, with the state modelled on kinship ties and even high level functionaries having to negotiate their obligations to the state alongside those to their kinship groups. As many anthropologists and historians of West African societies have argued, these structures were also directly connected to slavery, since those of slave status were generally without direct family and kin connections in Dahomeyan society; although there are



exceptions to this rule in West Africa, it was certainly often the case that slaves were strangers to the kinship groups

of the societies where they lived. In this way slavery was a way of actually expanding Dahomeyan society, since in time the offspring of slaves developed kinship ties and could enter society; and this was one of the major differences between slavery in West Africa and that in the plantation economies of the New World.

The consolidation of Dahomey's power was also, of course, a militarised endeavour. In common with the rise of states in early modern Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, documented by historians such as Jan Glete, the place of the military expansion and growth was a vital part of state power. Yet in the case of Dahomey, military power balanced organization and military supplies with deeply held beliefs. Important was access to European supplies and the growth in numbers of the army. There was also a powerful network of spies known as the *Agbajigbeto*, who sought out the roots of enemy power and communicated this to the kings at Abomey. However, as the scholar Paul Hazoume has shown through a study of oral traditions, the role of spies was as much spiritual as a strategy to gain information; the spies aimed to understand the supernatural strengths of the enemy, and then buried charms that would bring discord and undermine the divine protectors of the place.

Dahomey's rapid expansion in the 1720s and accommodation with Oyo through the 18th century was certainly a major feature of political change in this part of West Africa. As in Kongo, each society developed a complex state infrastructure which sought to centralize power and challenge the place of kin lineages which hitherto had held power. Access to international trade was a central part of the consolidation power, but it went with the continuation of deeply held beliefs on the centrality of divine power and the means to access it. As in most of the world in the 18th century, access to power was guided through spiritual power, and it was this that was seen to determine success in war, power, and state-building.

City-States and Kingly Power: Imperial Structures, Tribute, and Consolidation of the State in Dahomey and Oyo

In Dahomey and Oyo, the nature of kingly power was vital to the consolidation of both states in the 18th century. In time, the palace became the fundamental unit of government, and this gave the king's numerous wives a key role in political power. This meant that officeholders and kings were male, but the wielders and enforcers

of power could often be female; this process became particularly pronounced in Dahomey in the 19th century.

In both Oyo and Dahomey, the relationship between slavery and kinship related to structures of power at the palace. At Oyo, the *Alafin's* staff carried out the administrative and ceremonial tasks of the palace. These officials were called the *Eru Oba*, or the King's slaves. The highest ranking slaves were the eunuchs, or *Iwefa*: these were guardians of the wives and children of the *Alafin*, and involved in administrative and legal matters. The *Osi Iwefa* (eunuch of the left) dealt with collecting the revenues for the *Alafin* and could replace the *Alafin* as an intermediary with the Oyo chiefs. The *Ona Iwefa* (eunuch of the middle) dealt with legal decisions for the *Alafin*. The *Otun Iwefa* (eunuch of the right) had important religious and ritual roles. In this way, the eunuchs represented the balance of power in Oyo, where tax, law, and religion were the pillars of political authority.

As slaves and eunuchs, the *Iwefa* were stripped of family ties and marital relationships which could rival their dependence on the *Alafin*: they were thus the perfect lieutenants for the Oyo kings. The *Alafin* was further protected by slaves known as *Ilari*, who served as the *Alafin's* bodyguards, and were also messengers and collectors of taxes at the city gates. The dependence on slaves reveals both the importance of slavery within Oyo as a mark of status, and the importance of kin: only those without kin could be fully relied upon by the *Alafin* to serve his needs as required, since their loyalty both to him and to the state would not be compromised by kinship demands.

In Dahomey, royal power was increasingly protected by the king's wives, although as in Oyo eunuchs also held important positions in the palace. The 18th-century visitor to the Court, Bulfinch Lamb, described the Dahomeyan king as having 2000 wives, and the Brazilian priest Vicente Pires described at the end of the 18th century how the wives all had different roles. Some were barbers, some key bearers, some gave drinks to the deities. Access to the king could only be obtained through his senior wife, the *daklo*, who would convey messages; visitors are described by Edna Bay as lone men "surrounded by thousands of women and a number of eunuchs". Wives played crucial roles at moments of succession to the throne, and in the administration of the palace and the kingdom. As in Oyo, kinship connection (in this case through marriage to the king) was a key aspect of the organization of power in Dahomey.

As these kingdoms grew, so did importance of the relationship between the royal centre and the provinces. Oyo was divided into eight provinces in all known as

ekun, each being under the authority of a provincial ruler. There were three provinces to the west of the River Ogun - the *ekun otun* - three provinces to the east - the *ekun osi* - and two further provinces of Igbomina and Egbodo. There was some autonomy here, with judicial arguments first referred to the rulers of each *ekun*, and local towns paying tribute to each provincial head. However, Oyo-Ile's right to rule over cities and surrounding provinces was unquestioned and established by precedent. Subordinate towns had to send an annual tribute known as the *asingba*. Tribute was paid in the form of cowrie money, grass for the palace roofs at Oyo-Ile, and provisions. Troops were also sent to supplement the army of Oyo, and final judicial authority rested with the *Alafin* at Oyo-Ile, where disputes between the provinces and the capital were judged. Thus as the Oyo empire established itself in the 16th and 17th centuries, a tributary form of government such as that familiar from imperial histories was established.

In Dahomey, as in Oyo, the centralization of power and establishment of the state went together with the growth of the kingdom in the 18th century. On acceding to power in 1740, Tegbesu immediately strategised trade ahead of warfare and military conquests. He developed a policy of liquidating his rivals and established his right to choose his own successor from among his sons. Many administrative structures were borrowed from Oyo, where Tegbesu had been a hostage during the 1730s, which consolidated the links between the two kingdoms. Foremost among these was the borrowing of the *Ilari* royal slaves, which were mentioned in 1746 as messengers of Tegbesu. As in Oyo royal power was seen as preserved by those without other access to power and social networks, such as eunuchs and kinless slaves.

Tegbesu rapidly expanded administrative functions related to the trade, consolidating the place of the Yovogan and establishing the *Migan* position related to commerce and as a sort of prime minister. The *Agou* was made general of the army, and the *Dinu* was the chief eunuch in charge of the palace. By the end of the 18th century, this structure was well established. Further offices had been created, including the *Topozú*, who was in charge of agriculture; the *Mesconúm*, in charge of the royal wardrobe; as well as further military officers. There had been a rapid growth in new laws, covering issues from theft and breach of curfew, to intrusion on royal trading monopolies in tobacco and alcohol, adultery, and insults of the royal children.

As in Oyo, Dahomey's power depended in part on the extraction of tribute from subject peoples. Annual Customs were held where these tributes were paid, usually in cloth cowries and provisions. Control of trade

required access to the cowrie-money which lubricated the economy of the kingdom, while cloths - both locally made and imported from Europe and India - were commercial mainstays of trade for the whole region. Political power and the rise of the state had become hard to separate from access to the levers of trade and territorial expansion. As the 18th century came to an end, the political model of the rise of the state in both Dahomey and Oyo was fully established.

Religion and its Role in Politics and Society

West African societies remain deeply religious, and in the period examined here political power was inseparable from religious authority. Political leaders were seen to have particularly close relationships to deities and religious shrines, and the most famous leaders often initiated new religious cults. The interconnection of religious and political power was of course also commonplace in other societies around the world, as evidenced by the European conception of divine right and the divinity accorded to the Aztec emperor Moctezuma, to give just two examples; nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that for Oyo, Dahomey, and all other West African kingdoms in the era prior to European colonialism, it would be impossible to understand their history and their place in world civilizations without an understanding of the importance of religion.

It's important to grasp to begin with that religious cults were far from being static. Indeed, they were in a state of constant transformation, and one of the signs of the strength and flourishing of a kingdom in West Africa was precisely the innovation of new shrines and cults. This was something shared across West Africa as a whole, which was characterised in this era precisely through religious innovation, with the famous Ekpe shrine of Calabar (later influential in the emergence of secret societies in Sierra Leone in the 19th century) and numerous new shrines among the Diola people of Senegal emerging through the new historical dynamics of the period. Religious innovation is symbolic of the fact that far from being static and unchanging, West African societies in this era were extremely dynamic.

In both Oyo and Dahomey, these characteristics were essential to the functioning of the kingdoms. The way in which religious innovation and political power were related in Oyo is very clear through the rule of the *Alafin* Abipa, who as we have seen consolidated Oyo's power in the early 17th century. Abipa is also credited with having made two central ritual innovations, founding the Egungun cult of masqueraders representing the spirits

of deceased ancestors, as also the cult of *Ifa*, the deity of divination. Innovations continued throughout Oyo's history, with the Ogboni earth cult apparently formed after the destruction of Oyo-Ile in the 19th century. The centrality of these innovations in Oyo's political history can be gauged from the fact that both *Egungun* and *Ifa* remain central to Yoruba religious practice in the 21st century.

By the 18th century, when the Oyo empire was fully established, religious control remained a central part of Oyo's power. The organization of the Sango cult became a central part of the retention of power by Oyo-Ile. Priests of Sango had to travel to Oyo to be initiated by *Sango* priests known as the *Mogba*, at the royal shrine of Koso. The royal *Ilari*, who as we have seen were key bodyguards and messengers of the Alafin, were initiated priests of Sango, and thus entry into this cult was a way of shoring up loyalty and creating a new cult identity for slaves who as we have seen had lost family ties. The place of *Sango* among royal slaves of Oyo may go some way to explaining how *Sango* became one of the most important deities among enslaved Africans in Brazil practising the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé.

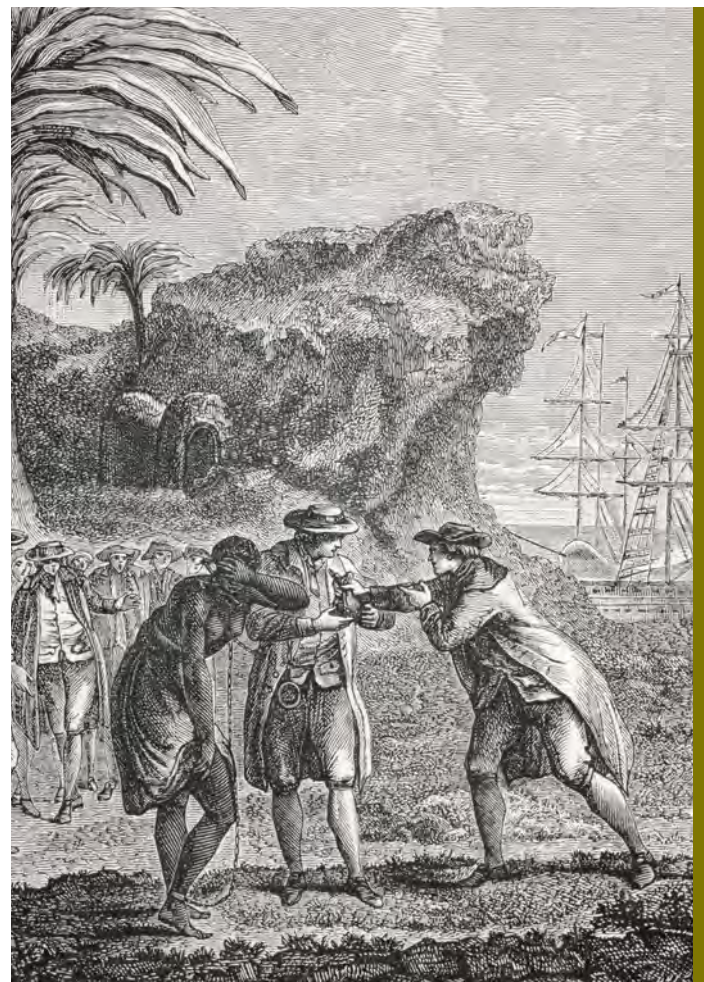
Beyond this key evidence as to the relationship of political power and religious identity, there were many other ways in which rituals associated with belief and practice shaped the role of the *Alafins* of Oyo. The *Alafin* was subject to severe ritual restrictions which were testament to his political authority. Normally, *Alafins* were restricted to the palace grounds, and appeared in public only at the three major annual festivals of Oyo. These were the *Mole* festival, in honour of the deity of divination known as *Ifa*; the *Orun* festival, where the *Alafin* made sacrifices to the deity to ensure their being in accord with his reign; and the *Bere* festival, where annual tributes were received from the provinces. Another important aspect of Oyo kingship related to the regalia of office. Although each provincial city had their own rulers, who were entitled to wear crowns, only the *Alafin* was permitted to wear a crown with a beaded fringe known as the *ade*; subordinate rulers wore beardless crowns known as the *akoro*, and were moreover not allowed to have eunuchs in their service. Thus were political power, ritual office, kinship, and slavery related in Oyo.

In Dahomey as in Oyo, religious power was inseparable from political power. Indeed, military strength in Dahomey was related to spiritual power, as the role of the Dahomeyan spies noted above makes clear. In his account of Dahomey's defeat of Whydah in 1727, Norris described how the Dahomeyan forces consulted their oracles as to the best way to attack Whydah, and were advised against advancing via the beach; while the

English slave trader William Snelgrave described how the Dahomeyan army ate the pythons which were revered as deities by the people of Whydah (as also snakes were in many West African societies).

As in Oyo, religious innovation was a central part of political power in Dahomey for two of the kingdom's most influential kings, Agaja and Tegbesu. Agaja sought to centralize spiritual authority in the palace, just as Oyo *Alafins* did through the Sango cult. Followers of *vodun* spirits were organised into local congregations, each led by a male-female pair of *vodunun*. Meanwhile, many priests of rival cults were attacked by Agaja. Priests of the *Sagbata* cult led resistance to the centralization of power under Agaja, and as a result many were sold into slavery. Rival cults offered rival avenues to political power, and at a time of centralization of power could not be tolerated by the Dahomeyan monarchy.

At the same time as centralization of religious power, there was a proliferation of cults. Norris described how Agaja allowed subject peoples to be "free in the exercise of their various superstitions" and become incorporated into Dahomey; in other words, if their cults did not challenge political power, religious pluralism was encouraged. Under Tegbesu, meanwhile, the centralization of religious power continued so that by the time of his death in 1774 the monarchy was held to



Slave trading in the 18th century

control the *vodun*. *Vodun* chapter houses were made to depend financially on the palace at Abomey through grants of land and Tegbesu made several innovations. He inaugurated the *Tohosu* cult for the *vodun* of the royal house, and encouraged *Vodun* who were diviners – in clear imitation of the importance of *Ifa* at Oyo which he had learnt when a hostage there prior to becoming king.

There was, therefore, no political power without religious authority in Oyo and Dahomey. The most powerful kings were precisely those credited with making religious innovations, and transforming the understanding of the parallel world of the ancestral spirits and its relationship to the material world. As Edna Bay puts it, “changes in the hierarchies of the *vodun*, or gods, were also comments on change in the world of humanity”.

Decline of Oyo and Dahomey: Political Divisions, European influence and the Impact of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

We have seen in this chapter that political power and success in Oyo and Dahomey was based on an extremely complex balance of forces. Both kingdoms had to be able to extract tribute from subject provinces, grow surplus through access to European trade, and ensure the support of their subjects through manifestations of and innovations in religious authority. For a while the fact that both kingdoms were able to act as go-betweens linking Atlantic and Saharan trades was to their advantage, but over time pressures grew from both sides, and this was to lead to the collapse of Oyo in the 19th century and reconstitution of Dahomey at the same time.

Oyo's fall was linked inextricably both to internal discord and a revolution further north among the Hausa states linked to the trans-Saharan trade. As we have seen, the second half of the 18th century was a time of growing tension between *Alafins* and the *Oyo-Mesi* centred around the centralization of power at Oyo-Ile. This centralization of power was something that followed increased access to trade goods through the European slave trade, and the competition for access to the fruits of this trade was one of the sources of internal division. Divided, weak, and beset by constant transfers of power, Oyo was in no condition to deal with radical political change that swept the north of what is now Nigeria in the early 19th century, and which we discussed in the chapter on Songhay. Oyo's imperialism in the era of the Atlantic slave trade had produced dangerous political tensions, tensions which sprang into the open and contested the centralization of power which had gone with Oyo's expansion in the 18th century.

In 1804, the Fulani of Sokoto (to the North-West of Kano) rebelled against the Hausa states in a jihad led by 'Uthman dan Fodio. This radical reformulation of political power in northern Nigeria under *sharia* law had far-reaching consequences not only in what had been in Songhay, but also further south. Dan Fodio was a scholar as well as a politician, and he embarked on a series of reforms which saw the spread of the Sokoto Caliphate – as the historian Murray Last has described it – southward towards Oyo. In 1823, the important Oyo province of Ilorin seceded from Oyo-Ile as a result of longstanding political and military tensions, joining with Sokoto, and this presaged the final collapse of Old Oyo in 1835, destroyed by troops from Ilorin.

Oyo's decline, paradoxically, assisted Dahomey in its consolidation of power in the 19th century. Further south and west from Sokoto than was Oyo, it was better able to withstand the impact of the Islamic reform movements sweeping the northern belt of Nigeria and what is now Benin. The secession of Ilorin in 1823 also saw Dahomey cease to pay tribute to Oyo, and become politically independent for the first time in almost a century. Nevertheless, the 19th century represented a difficult time of transition for a state which, as we have seen, was heavily dependent on the Atlantic slave trade for access to resources and the luxury items which allowed the kings of Dahomey to assert their status and difference.

The passing of the Abolition Act in 1807 by the British parliament saw the beginning of the end of the slave trade. Dahomey responded by sending embassies to Brazil urging it to be maintained, and the trade with Brazil continued for the first half of the 19th century. Many Afro-Brazilians returned to live in Ouidah and other Dahomeyan ports such as Agoué, and thus the interdependence of trade, slavery, and political power continued for some time, with Dahomey protected from greater political change through its distance from Sokoto and its ability to play off competing Atlantic powers such as the British and the Brazilians against one another.

Nevertheless, the writing was on the wall for the Atlantic slave trade, and the first half of the 19th century also saw the rise of agricultural production for export in West Africa, the so-called “legitimate trade” in products such as palm oil. The region to the east of Dahomey around Lagos, was especially active here. Nevertheless this transition in fact accentuated the practice of slavery in West Africa itself since most of the labour for the new “legitimate” plantations was undertaken by slaves. By the time of the onset of colonialism in the second half of the 19th century, Dahomey was therefore experiencing the full force of what AG Hopkins described as “the crisis of transition”.

Conclusion

For several centuries the kingdoms of Oyo and Dahomey flourished in the regions of what are now Benin and Nigeria. Their rise as powerful states exhibited common features with many other states of this period: tributary provinces, militarization and taxation, ritual authority, and a dependence on the slave trade which was the equal to that of the European nations of Britain, France, and Portugal.

The complexity of these states was impressive. They had manufactures of cloth and other products, conducted international trade north across the Sahara and West across the Atlantic, and deployed global diplomatic initiatives. They had complex administrative machinery which arose along with their own political complexity. At the same time, however, their growing power and centralization clashed with traditions of political independence and religious autonomy. As the profits of trade grew, access to these profits exacerbated the tensions caused by this conflict of centralization and autonomy. The importance of slavery and status also grew, creating faultlines across societies, and a ready body of people willing to adopt different paths. The rise of the Fulani *jihad* in Sokoto gave this opportunity, precipitating the collapse of Oyo and reforming its relationship to Dahomey.

Nevertheless, features of political and social organization, religious power and belief, all endured strongly into the colonial and postcolonial eras. The cultural strength of Oyo and Dahomey was far too strong to be crushed by the relatively shortlived intervention of colonialism, and is still apparent in the practices, belief and organization of their postcolonial successor states.

Dahomey: Factbox

c.1620-50 – Houegbadja founds the kingdom of Dahomey

1708 – King Agaja succeeds to power

1724 – Agaja conquers the kingdom of Allada

1727 – Agaja conquers Whydah

1728 – Oyo invades Dahomey and warfare begins continuously until 1740

1733 – Agaja creates the Yovogan position

1724-37 – Dahomey is also waging continual war against the Dutch

1740 – Agaja dies; succeeded by Tegbesu, who has been a hostage in Oyo

1748 – Tegbesu agrees to pay tribute to Oyo, which continues until 1823

1751 – Tegbesu sends embassies to Brazil to urge for more trade; but 1767-85 sees trade crisis and very few European ships stopping in Dahomeyan ports

1774 – Tegbesu is succeeded by Kpengla, who tries to reform the power of the Dahomeyan army, monopolize trade and fix prices

1789 – Kpengla dies and is succeeded by Agonglo

1797 – Agonglo is killed, and replaced by King Adandozan, who tries to rekindle slave trade from Brazil by sending ambassadors there. Adandozan will be deposed in 1818.

Oyo: Factbox

c. 1300-1500s: Oyo founds following migrations from Ile-Ife

c. 1530s: Nupe invaders occupy Oyo-Ile and Oyo's power recedes

c. 1608: *Alafin* Abipa re-establishes Oyo power at Oyo-Ile.

1680s: Oyo begins raiding southwards

1728: Invades Dahomey following Dahomey's expansion of power at Whydah and Allada.

1754: The *Basorun* Gaha seizes power in a coup by the *Oyomesi* against the power of the *Alafins*.

1764: Dahomey, Oyo and an Akan force defeat the Asante army at a battle

1774: Gaha is deposed by the *Alafin* Abiodun.

1783 and 1789: Abiodun leads failed campaigns against Borgu and Nupe respectively

1793-1817: A series of rebellions and autocratic uses of power leads to the secession of the important province of Ilorin in 1817.

1823: Ilorin joins the Sokoto Caliphate, which had formed in 1804 in what is now Northern Nigeria under the Fulani people. Also in 1823, Dahomey ceases to pay tribute. Oyo is in major decline.

1825: A British party under Hugh Clapperton reports Oyo as besieged by Fulani from Ilorin and the Sokoto Caliphate.

1835: The capital of Oyo-Ile is destroyed.

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Chapter Four:

The Kingdom of Benin, c.1500-c.1750

At the end of the 19th century, the European imperial powers became involved in what has become known to historians as “the scramble for Africa”. The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 saw the European powers draw up agreements as to respective spheres of influence which would shape their right to occupy African lands as colonial powers. A relationship of “colonial trusteeship” was envisaged, linking Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Portugal and Spain with their colonies in Africa. At the Brussels Conference of 1890, the ideological justification for this process was established, with the need to end slavery in Africa the prime rationale for the conquest and settlement of African kingdoms.

A key aspect of the process of colonization was the doctrine of “effective occupation”. Colonial powers would only exercise the rights of the colonial power if they could show that they occupied a territory. Such occupation required military presence on the ground, and hence the 1890s saw a series of military expeditions by European armies in Africa. In March 1897, one of these was led by a British military expedition to Benin City (known as Edo by

the Bini of Benin), the capital of the kingdom of Benin in what is now southern Nigeria. Following a military stand-off the British routed the Benin troops, and six months later Ovonramwen, the 35th Oba or King of Benin, was deported to the port of Calabar. Thus did 700 years of the kingdom’s history draw to a rapid close.

On taking possession of Edo, the British troops were amazed to find exquisite bronze carvings adorning the royal palace. These were looted and taken back to Britain, where many were housed in the British Museum and others dispersed around European museums then developing their collections of “primitive art”. These were at first taken by European scholars to be indicative of European influences on craftsmanship and techniques by the peoples of Benin. However in the century and more since, study has revealed the deep history of the bronzes and their relationship to articulations of royal power in Benin. The bronzes were commissioned by Obas to commemorate deeds of their rule and that of their predecessors, and functioned therefore as official histories of the kingdom and mnemonics for successive generations of the Benin court chroniclers, the Ikogbe and Ogboka. Through interpreting the bronzes in conjunction with other oral and written sources that we have on the kingdom, the history of Benin has become known.

Benin was one of the first kingdoms in the region of what is now Nigeria and Cameroon to have sustained contact with European traders. The Portuguese had established a trading post at Gwaton (Ughoton) by 1490, and had ambassadors at the court of the Oba from this time. Unlike many of its neighbours, Benin’s trade with Europeans was based primarily in textiles made in the kingdom, since the Obas barred the sale of male slaves into the Atlantic trade. As the Atlantic slave trade became more important from 1650 onwards, this made Benin’s relative position weaker compared to its neighbours, and decline set in before revitalisation under Oba Eresoyen towards 1750, by which time slave trading had begun in the kingdom. Thereafter Benin remained a force in the region until its conquest by the British in 1897, and the onset of formal colonialism.



Reasons for Rise of Benin; Situation in Coastal West Africa c. 1500; rise of trade with the Europeans, especially the Portuguese; slavery and ivory trades

Oral traditions on Benin describe its rise as having taken place at some time around the 12th century AD. According to Edo oral literatures, village chiefs (the *Uzama*) sent a messenger to Ile-Ife – the sacred town of the Yoruba peoples - to request a divine ruler to restore order after a period of discord. The divine ruler (the *Ooni*) sent his son, Oranmiyan, a figure who appears to have migrated from Ife. After a short time in the kingdom Oranmiyan conceived a son, Eweka, who was crowned as the Oba, probably around 1200 AD. The origin narratives of Benin thus correspond closely to the idea of the “stranger-king”, which as we saw in the Kongo chapter is a tradition found in other parts of Africa and the world.

It is however clear that the Obas of Benin did have strong links to Yorubaland. Connections between Edo and Ile-Ife remained close throughout the history of Benin. Towards the end of the 13th century, Oba Oguola is said to have sent to Ile-Ife for a master bronze caster to teach the craft to the Edo, and exchange with Ile-Ife deepened the craft in Edo as the centuries passed. Moreover, as the historians Peter Roese and Dmitri Bondarenko have shown, Edo rituals reveal the close links to the Yoruba, since heads of the deceased Obas were sent to Ife for burial right up to the time of the British conquest. These links are

apparent in other sources, as the early 16th century Portuguese chroniclers Duarte Pacheco Pereira and João de Barros describe how the Obas of Benin used to send ambassadors to a Prince they call Ogone (Oghene) on ascending the throne, for formal confirmation; the Oba's death, too, was reported to the Oghene, and his heir received a copper cross, cap and staff of office. This almost certainly refers to the Oni of Ife, which shows the deep connection of Benin to Yoruba politics and religious belief throughout Benin's history.

By the middle of the 15th century, a series of changes began to affect the kingdom. To the North of Benin, in Oyo (see the chapter on Oyo and Dahomey) and Nupe, dynasties became consolidated and developed new relationships with the Edo. Oba Ewuare (enthroned c. 1440) responded by strengthening town chiefs against palace factions in a bid for unity. Administrative changes consolidated the kingdom, with the establishment of three associations of palace chiefs and royal festivals designed to protect and renew the kingdom, such as the Ugie Erhe Oba dedicated to the Oba's sacred ancestors, and Igue which strengthened the Oba's divine powers. Ewuare also expanded the urban structures of Edo, improving the road system. These developments were facilitated by growing military power, as Benin expanded East to the lands of the Ibo and Ijo on the right bank of the Niger, South to the Ocean, and West towards the Lagos lagoon.

Thus in the decades prior to the Portuguese arrival in the 1480s, Benin had expanded territorially as well as consolidating as a state. A key facet of this was that, as the historian AFC Ryder noted, Oba Ewuare's power was strengthened by his reputation as both a magician and warrior. The belief that the dynasty was supernaturally gifted fed military success, which in turn fed this belief. This aspect of Benin would play a key part in the kingdom's early relationship with European powers, since it rapidly became clear that unlike the case in Kongo, the Edo showed no signs of converting to Christianity; their confidence in their newly created shrines and religious practice determined this. While the trading post at the existing Benin town of Gwaton was founded by the Portuguese by 1490, therefore, it was abandoned in 1507: trade was slim, conversion was not forthcoming, and Portuguese traders stationed there tended to sicken and die.

The next 50 years saw the evolution of the trading relationship which characterised the first two centuries of Benin's relations with European traders. The initial focus of trade in the 1490s was in the Beni pepper, which served as a popular substitute for Indian spices and was marketed by Portuguese traders through their strong networks in Antwerp (Belgium). But when spices from India came onto the market following Vasco da Gama's voyage to Calicut at

Chief with armour, subordinate soldiers and musicians from the palace of the Oba in Benin



the end of the 15th century, the focus began to shift to the slave trade: traders from the Portuguese island of São Tomé were trading slaves from Benin by 1510, often to sell further along the West African coast in Elmina for gold, which was then shipped to Europe.

Nevertheless the slave trade in Benin at this time was very different from that in other parts of Atlantic Africa such as Kongo and Senegambia. The Obas of Benin were unwilling to sell men from the kingdom, who were vital for warfare and were in any case seen as "slaves of the king". As early as 1516, according to Ryder, the Oba of Benin had established separate markets for male and female slaves; restrictions on the sale of male slaves developed by 1530 into a total embargo on the Atlantic slave trade which persisted more or less until 1700. Benin therefore offers a striking example of a West African kingdom which strongly resisted the demands of European slave traders and instead traded with the wider world through local cloth production.

Benin's early relationships with Europeans were therefore very complex. Initially exchanges were positive, with ambassadors from Benin visiting Portuguese and 3 Catholic churches built in Edo before 1500. By 1516, when the Igala of the Kingdom of Idah invaded Edo from the north-east along with their allies of Idoma, Portuguese troops fought alongside the Oba's warriors to defeat them. The Portuguese commercial influence in Benin clearly had some cultural effects, as can be seen from the representations of Portuguese traders on the Benin bronzes, and the relationship of some Edo words to their Portuguese counterparts: where the Edo for ball is *ibolu* and the Portuguese *bola*, the Edo for coconut palms *ekoka* and the Portuguese *coqueiro*, and the Edo for store *amagazemi* and the Portuguese *armazem*.

Nevertheless when the economic demands shifted from peppers and cloth to slaves, the Obas resisted the changes. Benin developed its own administrative, economic and political structures according to local impetus and priorities.

The political, social, and economic development and trade of the Kingdom of Benin

The heart of the kingdom of Benin was its capital at Edo, consolidated and expanded under Oba Ewuare prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. Visitors to Edo from the coastal trading port at Gwatón arrived from the south-west. Between Gwatón and Edo was thick forest, but this suddenly cleared to reveal a moat and, in time, a large wall which encircled the whole town. The wall reached in some places

to a height of 20 metres, and covered an area of some 7.5 square kilometres. This was in fact a fraction of a complex urban system which was at the heart of the kingdom.

It is important to understand that Edo's urban configuration expanded dramatically over the 16th and 17th centuries, testament to a society and kingdom undergoing change and self-transformation. In 1505, the Portuguese official Duarte Pacheco Pereira - who visited the city four times - wrote how there was no wall around Edo, and that the houses were made of sun-dried bricks and covered with palm leaves. By 1602, however, the Dutch trader Dirck Ruiters described the houses of Edo as being "in good order, one close to the other, like houses in Holland. Houses in which well-to-do people such as gentlemen dwell, have two or three steps to go up, and in front have an ante-court where one may sit dry." The entrance to the city at Gwatón gate also housed a "very high bulwark, very thick and strongly made, with a very broad deep ditch". By the 1660s the Dutch scholar Olfert Dapper described Edo as having several gates, 8 or 9 feet high and made from a single piece of wood, guarded by an official called the *Ukonurho* who levied taxes in cowries or kind.

The evolution of Benin's political organization and the growth of Edo was linked to the growth of the currency systems in the kingdom and the opportunities this provided for taxation and political consolidation. Another Dutch traveller, Nyandael, wrote in 1702 that the Obas of Benin had good income from taxes of cowries, which were raised by provincial governors from their local territories. Though cowries had long been traded across the Sahara prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, and had been used as a sort of currency in parts of West Africa by the 13th and 14th centuries, the Portuguese expanded the currency base of West Africa by starting to bring cowries as ballast in their ships from the Maldivian islands in the Indian Ocean: this expanded the currency in circulation, stimulating trade, taxation, and the fiscal development of the state in Benin. By 1786, one observer described the royal council as having 60 officials: twenty dealt with receipts and expenses, twenty dealt with trade, and twenty with war.

The expansion of trade and the state is easily apparent in the sources which detail the different types of trade and commercial exchange and production which characterised the economy of Benin. As already noted, early Atlantic trade with the Portuguese was for peppers and cloths. In 1505, Pacheco Pereira also noted markets with strong exchanges of cotton cloths, leopard skins, palm oil, and coral beads, bought by the Portuguese for brass and copper armrings known as manillas. By the 1520s, the Benin commercial exchanges with the Portuguese had expanded to include the production

of yams, wood and water to provision passing ships. This was to become a mainstay of the Atlantic trade not only of Benin but of many Atlantic African kingdoms: slave trading ships taking on occasion 500 and even 700 Africans to the New World needed large amounts of provisions and water, which African societies had to increase and systematise their agricultural production in order to supply; far from being subsistence agricultural economies, most Atlantic African agricultural regimes transformed their production mechanisms and output, therefore, as part of their entry into the world market.

By 1600, the trading networks of Benin had grown further, and Dirck Ruiters described the complexity of markets and the variety of produce available:

"They bring all sorts of things to sell, such as live dogs, of which they eat many, roasted monkeys, catfish, rats, parrots, fowls, yams, manigette pepper in pods or ears, dried lizards, palm oil, large beans, as well as various sorts of fruits, vegetables and animals fit for food. Much firewood and woodwork, such as dishes and drinking cups and other sorts are also brought to market for sale. Also much thread spun from cotton, of which they make their clothes...they also bring a great quantity of ironwork to sell there, such as implements for fishing, ploughs, and otherwise preparing the land."

Ruiters' account makes clear that production of cloth and everyday objects was an important part of life in Benin. What may be most important in his account, however is the emphasis on iron. Agricultural production grew in response to a variety of factors, but in Benin as elsewhere in West Africa the supply of iron was an important part of it. Though iron was known in most parts of Atlantic Africa prior to European trade, trading ships greatly expanded the supply. This increased the availability of iron to be transformed into agricultural tools which helped with clearing and managing land. The emergence of iron as a form of currency replacing the brass and copper manillas of the 16th century began in the 1630s, just as the slave trade took off from the region as a whole; thus the increasing supplies of iron came at an opportune moment for the increase of agricultural production to meet the growing demand for food supplies from the African continent. In many ways, therefore, this was an early forerunner of cash crop economies.

Trade was thus an important part of royal power in Benin, offering revenues, receipts, and luxury goods for display and distribution to loyal followers. Obas were able to tax revenue and grow stocks of money and their reserves held in cowries, the currency of Benin. Nevertheless, as the Dutch trade to Benin continued in the 17th century, economic pressures grew. Dutch supplies of cloth from both Dutch and Indian producers challenged the

monopoly of Benin producers, while also expanding the range of goods available to consumers in Benin. Benin's export trade was badly affected, and by 1700 Benin cloth was no longer in demand at the ports of the coast.



A Benin Bronze head for display at a shrine to the Obas, a tradition started under Ewuare

Importance of the Oba, achievements of individual Obas, selection procedures, importance of ceremony and ritual, tribute

At the centre of the kingdom of Benin was unquestionably the Oba. The Oba was seen as holding a divine power, and his court was at the heart of Edo and the kingdom. Complex rituals and sumptuary laws of dress and contact determined who the Oba could speak to and how close people could come to him in addressing him, as well as what they should wear. By the beginning of the 17th century, observers described how he only left the palace on one or two special occasions per year for annual festivals.

In Benin, therefore, as in other parts of the world at the time such as the Aztec empire, and Europe with its doctrine of divine right, kingship and supernatural power were closely connected. The Oba's divinity was traced back through the kingly line to Oranmiyan, mythical founder of the kingdom whose connections to Ile-Ife

gave supernatural credentials. This power was manifested in various ways. Only the Oba had power of life and death, while as the historian RE Bradbury notes the inhabitants of Edo considered themselves “true slaves” of the Oba: as Nyandael wrote in 1702, the Oba “calls all his subjects slaves, however great nobles they may be”. Anyone suggesting that the Oba ate, washed, slept or was even mortal would face capital punishment.

As the Oba was confined for so much of his life to his palace, its physical manifestation was of great importance. It was much the most impressive complex in Edo, and visitors were affected by its size and scope. Olfert Dapper described how “the king’s court is square, and stands at the right hand side when entering the town by the gate of [Gwatón], and is certainly as large as the town of Haarlem [near Amsterdam, in the Netherlands]...it is divided into many magnificent palaces, houses, and apartments of the courtiers, and comprises beautiful and long square galleries, about as large as the Exchange at Amsterdam, but one larger than another, resting on wooden pillars, from top to bottom covered with cast copper on which are engraved the pictures of their war exploits at battles, and are kept very clean”.

Given the religious and political power associated with the royal court at Edo, and the dependent relationship between commoners and the king, ordinary members of Benin society were bound by strict rules as to their behaviour at court. The English trader Wyndham described in 1558 how “when the nobleman are in his [the Oba’s] presence, they never look him in the face, but sit cowering...upon their buttocks with their elbows upon their knees and their hands before their faces, not looking up until the king command them...likewise when they depart they turn not their backs toward him but goe creeping backward with like reverence”.

With such a powerful structural and symbolic hold over the Edo imaginary, the royal palace evolved in time to become a highly complex administrative and political centre. In the 16th century, town and palace chiefs evolved known as the *eghaevo n’ore* and *eghaevo n’ogbe*. There were in addition three classes of titles within the palace: the chamberlains (*iwebo*), household officers (*iwegune*), and attendants of the king’s family (*ibiwe*). The *iwebo* were in charge of the Oba’s regalia of state, including his throne and ceremonial wardrobe; the *iwegune* looked after the private apartments of the Oba and arranged private audiences; the *ibiwe* looked after the Oba’s wives and children, and settled disputes between them.

As Benin grew, the different palace titleholders became increasingly involved in palace revenues and stores. The *iwebo* looked after the Oba’s reserves of cowries,

beads and cloth, for instance, while the *iwegune* were responsible for collecting tribute and taxes paid in kind such as yams and other produce. Meanwhile the two senior *eghaevo* of the *iwebo* supervised trade with the Europeans at Gwatón, while officials from all three title-groups were sent to villages to organise levies of troops and investigate complaints.

Understanding the role of the palace titles is very important to understanding Benin. Though nobility was an important part of Edo hierarchies, and was symbolised through the wearing of coral beads, access and promotion to the titles was on merit, and depended on prowess and achievement. Each group of titles had grades, and commoners were initiated into one type of title and then gradually promoted through the ranks. Having reached the title of *uko*, or messenger, they became eligible for any title within their group; taking a new title was however very expensive, as fees had to be paid to all title-holders. Nevertheless, these titles were not hereditary, and power was vested in the title rather than the holder; this was something in common with other West African political systems, as the historian Joseph Miller has argued in the case of the *Tsinguri* title among the Imbangala of Angola.

Given the importance of the Oba, many of them became central figures in the historical imaginary of Benin. As we have seen, a central figure was that of Ewuare, who accelerated the urbanisation of Edo in the mid-15th century and developed new titles and administrative structures. Another important feature of Ewuare’s rule was his development of new religious structures, and many of the divine symbols and attributes of the supreme ruler in Benin appeared under his rule. Ewuare introduced several new religious cults to deified characters of heroic stories such as Ake, Oza and Okhwahe, founded new shrines, and established new festivals. As we saw in the first section of this chapter, the strength of Benin at the time of the Portuguese arrival and its ability to reject the trading demand for slaves may well be related to the ideological strength and religious transformation effected in the kingdom by Ewuare.

Ewuare was succeeded by Oba Ozolua (c. 1481-1504), another key figure in Benin’s history. It was Ozolua who established stable trade relations with the Portuguese and consolidated the achievements of Ewuare. Ozolua was an expansionist Oba, who led battle against the Ijebu-Yorubas according to Duarte Pacheco Pereira. Edo tradition claims that he conquered 200 towns, but as 200 is a mythical number for the Edo this is symbolic rather of his achievements in expanding the kingdom. Recognising the importance of trade with the Portuguese for wealth and power he arranged for a Portuguese tutor for his heir, Esigie.

Esigie was also a key figure in Benin's golden age. He established diplomatic ties with the Portuguese, sending ambassadors to Lisbon in 1514, and establishing a school in Edo for teaching the reading and writing of Portuguese. It was also Esigie who began the careful regulation of the trade, barring the export of male slaves, and expanded the importance of brass and copper working with the influx of these metals as manillas through the Portuguese trade. The bronzes of the era frequently depict Esigie on horseback, something which is emblematic both of his military triumphs and his close relationship with the Portuguese. Esigie also introduced the queen mother cult after his own mother, *Idia*; his mother secured his power

through occult medicines, and thereafter the cult of the queen mother, the *iyoba*, provided the queen mother with her own palace, chiefs and attendants.

Esigie was followed by Oba Orhogbua in the mid-16th century, who led the expansion to conquer the Lagos lagoon, turning the Lagos kingdom into a vassal of Benin. This was the end of the high point of Benin kingship. Orhogbua's son, Ehengbuda (c. 1570-80) found it increasingly hard to combat the centrifugal forces which gave dependent peoples such as the Itsekiri the means to break away from Edo's power. The access to European trade goods gave different coastal peoples such as the Itsekiri the means to obtain the material goods and iron which could assist them to break away from Benin's control. The Obas of the 17th century are much less known both in European written sources and Benin oral sources, testament to the struggles and waning power of the kingdom which came to characterise it by the end of the 17th century.

The Benin military; Imperial structure and the relationship between Benin City State, the Empire, and Subject Kingdoms

The highpoint of Benin as a kingdom came as we have seen in the 16th century. This brought together the transformations in Benin kingship and belief under Oba Ewuare with the opportunities coming through trade with the Portuguese, and also the growth of discourses of representation of this history through the expansion of the guilds of brass craftsmen under Oba Esigie. However a further key aspect of Benin's golden age was the militarization of the state and Benin's status as an expansionist kingdom in its golden age.



Benin – early 16th Century mask of an Iyoba

One of the aspects of the relationship with the Portuguese which at first interested Obas such as Ozolua and Esigie was the potential for access to Portuguese firearms. As previously noted, some Portuguese fought alongside the armies of Edo in a battle of 1516, and request for military assistance was one of the aims of the embassy sent by Esigie to Portugal in 1514. Nevertheless, this alliance was to be fleeting. At around this time, 1513 or 1514, Esigie gave orders to seize a Portuguese cannon from a ship; the crux of the dispute related to the intersection of religious belief and military power, since the Portuguese were only willing to hand over firearms and cannons to a baptised Oba. Given that the Oba's renewed powers came from authority over the new cults which Oba Ewuare had founded within living memory, this was an impossible demand, and so the alliance desired by the Obas never came to pass.

The 16th century therefore saw important changes in military organisation. As we have seen already, this was a time of expansion, with Ozolua, Esigie and Orhogbua expanding the boundaries of the kingdom to Lagos and east to the lands of the Igbo. It was the Oba's duty to declare war and to command high-ranking military officers; however, by the end of the 16th century this function had been increasingly devolved to the *iyase* of premier, who was leader of the *eghaevo n'ore* (town chiefs).

By the 17th century, Dapper described how the standing army of Benin reached to 20,000 men, and there was a reserve of up to 80 or 100,000 men in times of need. The commander in the field, the *owe-asery*, had supreme power in battle, and both nobles and commoners fought alongside each other in campaigns which, according to Dapper, involved the waging of “great wars against the neighbouring kings, i.e., beyond Benin to the east and north, [conquering] many of their towns and villages, getting plenty of booty”.

Thus, by this period Benin had expanded far beyond the confines of the original kingdom. An imperial system had developed which required a complex relationship between Edo and the provinces, and which grew alongside the expansion of the market economy with the growth of the currency base in cowries. Benin had a rising imperial structure, and Dapper described how “there are many towns in this Kingdom whose names are yet unknown, except a few; for many unknown towns lie at a distance of eight or nine days travelling beyond the town of Benin [Edo]...besides an innumerable quantity of villages along the river of Benin, and further up country”.

The growth of the empire became a mechanism to diffuse tensions within the royal household and to expand the wealth of the Oba. Quarrelsome sons and brothers of the Obas were often appointed as governors of distant provinces to which they would migrate along with their dependants and retainues, thereby diminishing the tensions at Edo. These distant provinces and their villages also became important granaries and sources of manpower for the army; the provincial governors levied food for the palace twice per year from each village, and the Oba had the right to require labour from the villages to work on the maintenance of the palace buildings or to build new ones. Undergirding these obligations and demands from the centre were symbolic means of control and subservience: every new Oba would send pieces of chalk to his vassals and to the rulers of the villages, but if any of them refused to accept this token of power – or to supply the twice-yearly levy of provisions – they would be deemed in revolt and subject to reprisals.

To ensure that the tributary villages were able to meet these requirements, village administration was devolved. Each village had a sole head, the *Odiunwere*, who governed locally along with a council of elders, and shared authority with the hereditary chief called the *Onogie*; executive power lay finally with the *Odiunwere*, since the council of elders could overrule the *Onogie*. It was the *Odiunwere* who organised the age grades of village youth in charge of agricultural production, and who mediated with the central authority and provincial governors.

This structure of governance was well organised, therefore, and grew along with Benin’s political, economic and military power. There were nevertheless inherent tensions within the imperial structure which often provoked conflict. As noted previously, collection of village tribute was arranged by the officials of the three palace title-groups, the *ivebo*, *iveguné*, and *ibiwe*. Those sent on these visits were therefore able to establish marriage alliances and local trade links, and to receive gifts. Imperial control was thus achieved through a means which also allowed palace officials to gain power and enrich themselves. The balance of power between the Oba and his key officials became more difficult to manage, and conflict could often arise at times of succession, which contributed to the growing problems within the kingdom in the later 17th century.

Material Culture and Artistic Achievements; Religion, Culture, and the Olokun Cult

One of the most remarkable things about Benin from the vantage point of the 21st century is the extraordinary range of artistic representations which have been left to consider the history of this strong West African kingdom. So powerful, varied, and complex were the bronze castings wrought in Edo that, as we have seen, when the first exemplars were seized and brought back to Europe it was assumed that they were testament to external influence; then, when subsequent examples of West African artistry and manufacture such as the Luso-African ivories were discovered, it was assumed in the Western academy that these must derive from Benin, and could not have arisen independently in a separate part of the continent (such as, in this case, Sierra Leone).

There can be no doubt when looking at the heritage of sculpture and representation of history from Edo that Benin was a powerful, complex, and sophisticated civilization. The bronzes provide powerful evidence of the past of Edo, and of the ideas that underpinned it. One remarkable example is the way in which the swords of Benin warriors were shaped like leaves, testament to the power of *axé*, a Yoruba concept of life force and power in the world which was at the heart of beliefs. *Axé* inhered to specific aspects of the natural world, and was subsequently of great influence to the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, which arose in north-eastern Brazil in the late 18th century with the increase in Yoruba-speaking slaves despatched to the New World. Also important is the way in which helmets are girded with cowries – testament to the rising importance of cowrie currencies and taxation as discussed in this chapter – and of the depictions of books and umbrellas, symbols of status and Benin’s place

in a global nexus of trade and exchange which began in the kingdom at an early time.

The tradition of casting was a very old one in Benin, linked both to the spiritual power of the Obas and the relationship of Benin to Ife. Oral histories recount two versions. The first claims that Oba Oguola, circa 1280, sent to Ife for a master brass caster to teach the craft at Edo; while the second claims that the skill evolved independently in Benin, but benefitting from the close connection to Ife. Casters in both regions use a method known as “lost wax”, where an intricate wax model is constructed over a clay core. Clay is then diligently layered upon the wax, heated, and then the wax melts through a furrow. Molten metal is then poured into the mould left behind, and the hardened clay then prised away, with the image revealed now cast in the mould.



Benin – A head made by the lost wax process of bronze casting. This is thought to be a portrait of an Ife king (Oni)

There was then certainly a tradition in casting in Benin prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. Nevertheless, the Portuguese trade stimulated the expansion of the craft, with an influx of copper manilas as currency as we have seen. This offered Obas an important opportunity to elaborate upon their symbolic power. As the art historian Kathleen Bickford Berzock notes, the royal arts of Benin were designed to consecrate the centrality of the Oba to the kingdom. Casters constituted an exclusive guild within the palace, and were the highest-ranking craft guild within the *iwebo* titles. Throughout Benin’s history until the coming of the Europeans, casters worked within the palace compound, and their job was to elaborate “official histories” of the central events within each Oba’s reign. The practice of plaque production expanded significantly during the reign of Oba Esigie in the mid-

16th century, at the height of the Portuguese trade; and it also declined significantly in the 18th century, along with the power of Benin.

As in many other parts of the world, therefore, art and power were deeply connected in Benin. Just as art was deeply connected to religious patronage in medieval and early modern Europe, so too in Benin the casters and the associated guilds of craftsmen in the palace – the ivory and wood carvers (*igbesanmwana*), leather workers (*iskepori*) and beadmakers (*evisen*) – had as a principal function the representation of the Oba’s divine power and royal majesty. For Obas were perceived as the latest in a long line of divine rulers of Benin, and the very careful sumptuary laws surrounding who could see the Oba eat, who could talk to the Oba, and when the Oba could leave the palace – to celebrate annual sacrifices to his ancestors – were all designed to emphasise this divinity.

An important feature of the power of Obas was therefore their capacity to innovate in terms of the working of representations of both history and of the world. Magic and art had a close connection, for each produced something from nothing. As the anthropologist Patrick McNaughton has shown, blacksmiths held a close connection to occult power in many West African societies, and the ability of Benin’s casters to mould metal into representations of reality thus closely allied them to both representations of reality and to the mysteries of reality and the magic underlying them. Obas too were touched by this power, and brought it close to them by sequestering the casters in the palace compound and directing their energies to representations of royal histories.

As we have seen in this analysis of Benin, an important feature of the kingdom’s strength was its religious power and the important role which religious innovation played in securing the kingdom’s independence. A key feature of this strength was not only the ways in which the Obas innovated to add artistic power to their religious power, but also the way in which new shrines were developed to represent spiritual meanings of the kingdom’s transformations. Arising according to oral tradition under Oba Ewuare in the late 15th century, the religious cult of *Olokun* is an example of such transformations. *Olokun* became particularly important ideologically for Obas, and in Benin visual arts was closely associated with the Portuguese. *Olokun* was the Deity of the Sea, and was consulted prior to a child’s birth to consider what they ought to achieve in the land of the living: as representative of the power of the sea to shape lives, and the ways in which Atlantic trade had hastened social and material transformations, *Olokun* was central to how the historical transformations of the time could be

represented, along with the castings which still confront us with the power and representations of the truth of the Edo past.

Conclusion: Benin's Decline and Renewal in the 18th Century

The decline of Benin began in the 17th century. In approximately 1608, Oba Ohuan died without an heir, precipitating a major succession crisis. A series of "puppet Obas" of powerful chiefs followed, and the details of many of the Obas of the 17th century remain shrouded in mystery. Towards 1700, a series of Obas gave greater shape to the kingdom: rulers such as Akengboi (1669-75), Ahenkpaye (1675-84), Akengbedu (1684-89) and Oreoghene (1689-1700) found a place in Benin history. Yet nevertheless, the kingdom was much poorer than it had been in the Golden Age of the 16th century: the decline in value of its cloth exports, and the rise of slave trading elsewhere in the region made the Benin economic and political model increasingly hard to sustain.

In the 18th century, Benin began to revitalise itself however. By 1725, one French report claimed that the King of Allada was a vassal of Benin. Key to this appears to have been a shift in royal policy, since by 1730 the Obas were selling war captives as slaves to the Dutch. Trade grew through the 1730s, and in 1737 Oba Eresoyen took power and presided over the rebuilding of some of Benin's former grandeur. Eresoyen expanded the palace and rebuilt the floor and walls with cowries, in testament to the wealth of the kingdom. The later 18th-century accounts of the large royal council are testament to the administrative renewal which became possible once Benin had entered the slave trade.

Oral histories recall some of this process of change and its relationship to external trade. The historian Cecil Ling Roth noted an oral tradition of European trade which was taken down in the 1890s: "The white men stayed long, many many years they come to trade, and if a man comes to trade he must sit down and sell his things softly softly; they used to buy ivory, redwood, oil, gum, and slaves; then there was a different white man who used to come, but he only bought slaves; when he came, a messenger used to come before him to tell everyone he was coming, then if a man had any slaves to sell he could send to farm to get them, but he only paid a poor price; one to four bags [of cowries]".

Benin had evolved from a powerful kingdom with a complex administration, and a mixed trade. After its decline in the 17th and early 18th century, it had

managed to rise again and reposition itself through the slave trade. In this way it became one of the great survival stories of West African political history. But the 18th-century version was compromised by the dependence on slave trading, as this oral history notes. The kingdom no longer had the same power and confidence as before, and the volume of casting declined notably, and along with them the representations of royal power. The Benin which was conquered by the British military in 1897 had been through many transformations since the rise of the kingdom in the 12th century, the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century, and the Golden age of the 16th century; its transformations were testament to the power of Edo and its people to innovate new directions in their circumstances, and also to the increasing power of the outside world in its relationship with one of the most important West African kingdoms.

Factbox

- c. 1200 – Oba Eweka crowned first Oba of Benin
- c. 1280 – Coppercasters requested from Ife to help with the development of copper casting in Edo
- c. 1440 – Oba Equare enthroned and transforms many aspects of Benin
- c. 1481-1504 – Reign of Oba Ezuola who expands Benin's territories hugely
- 1485 – Portuguese arrive and begin trading with Oba Ezuola.
- 1490 – Portuguese trading post at Gwaton founded
- By 1500 there are 3 churches in Benin
- 1507 – Portuguese trading post at Gwaton closed.
- 1510 – Traders from São Tomé begin plying for slaves to Benin
- 1514 – Oba Esigie sends ambassadors to Portugal
- 1516 – Separate slave markets for male and female slaves established by Oba Esigie
- c. 1550 – Oba Orhogbua expands Benin to the borders of Lagos. Copper casting grows rapidly at this time.
- c. 1570-80 Oba Ehengbuda finds it hard to control the centrifugal forces of Benin – the Itsekiri break away.
- 1608 – Succession crisis in Benin and the kingdom's power declines through the 17th century
- 1700s – Civil conflict followed by retrenchment

1725 – Allada is a vassal of Benin

1730 – Benin is trading war captives to the Dutch

1737 – Accession of Eresoyen, who revitalised aspects of Benin

1897 – British seize Benin during the scramble for Africa

Resource List

Kathleen Bickford Berzock, *Benin: Royal Arts of a West African Kingdom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

RE Bradbury, *Benin Studies* (London: International Africa Institute, 1973)

H Ling-Roth, *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968; first published 1903).

Lt-Gen Pitt-Rivers: *Antique Works of Art from Benin* (London: Harrison & Son, 1900)

Peter M Roese and Dmitri M Bondarenko, *A Popular History of Benin: The Rise and Fall of a Mighty Forest Kingdom* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003)

AFC Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897* (Harlow: Longmans, Green & Co, 1969)

Conclusion

The material covered in this coursebook necessarily represents only a starting point for students and teachers alike. The sheer breadth of geographical area and timeframe covered means that this text could only ever be an introduction to the extraordinary depth and complexity of West African histories. Where university history departments traditionally have specialists on French, German, Spanish, Italian history and the like, the fact that one can be a historian of “West Africa” tells its own story.

Nevertheless, some general conclusions can be drawn as to the question of the importance of the histories that this course has looked at. In the introduction to this coursebook, it was suggested that the study of precolonial West African history was valuable in part because it allows students to interrogate the very discipline of history itself, and why it matters. Now that we have reached the concluding remarks, it is worth illustrating this point in more detail.

In the first place, the analysis of these four West African kingdoms has thrown up more connections to the political histories of the rest of the world than might previously have been imagined. The rise of the strong centralised state in Benin, Dahomey, and Songhay was shown to be deeply connected to rising militarization and the growing tax base which allowed a standing army. Here we can see strong parallels to the growth of the state in Europe at the same time, which followed the pattern of what the historian Jan Glete has called the “fiscal military state”. The relationship between central state power and the monopoly of violence emerges strongly in this comparative framework, and shows how important it is for historians of many regions of the world.

Another important comparative aspect – and one which to many readers will have come as a surprise – is the way in which the growth of the state in West Africa also took place within a globalised arena. In all the cases examined, West African monarchs took global diplomatic initiatives at various points in time. In the 16th century, the Askias of Songhay embarked on the pilgrimage to Mecca and had diplomatic and intellectual ties to Cairo and Morocco. Also in the 16th century, the Obas of Benin sent embassies to Portugal and formed an early military alliance with them. At the same time, the *manikongos* were sending members of the elite *mwissikongo* to study in Portugal, and in the 17th century would send ambassadors to Brazil, the Netherlands and the Vatican. In the 18th century, meanwhile, Dahomey would send ambassadors

to Brazil and invite European representatives to their annual festivals.

West African states were therefore globalised from a very early time, far earlier than previous generations of historians recognised. The formation of diplomatic ties and global links for which trade acted as a conduit was every bit as important to the consolidation of West African kingdoms as it was to the rise of the state in Europe during the same period of time. Whether or not West Africa was any less “globalised” than Europe becomes much more of an open question that has usually been imagined: far from being outside currents of historical change, West Africa was thoroughly interlinked with them from exactly the same time as was Europe.

The relationship of global connections and trade to state formation in West Africa at this time is therefore of much importance. This is nevertheless something which historians of Africa and of Europe have been reluctant to recognise. From the African side, the reason is very simple: giving too much weight to outside influences in the formation of West African states is seen to repeat the old colonial narratives which denied Africans agency in their own histories. Nevertheless, a different twist to that narrative emerges when we consider that one of the problems in focussing on this external influence has traditionally been that such external influences are seen as a purely African phenomenon. However, from the European side, external influences and diplomatic ties with African states (and those of other world regions) were also important to the rise of the state. It is the tendency of European historians to concentrate on internal factors in state formation which is at fault, therefore, not the identification of the way in which global links structured the rise of the state in both West Africa and Europe. Thus studying West African histories allows us not only a window onto a very important region of the world, but also to place aspects of European history in a fuller and more global perspective.

The relevance of external factors in state formation is important because it links the study of precolonial African history to issues of burning relevance to Africa today. Political scientists and activists of the 1970s such as Walter Rodney and André Gunder Frank developed a thesis known as “dependency theory”. In this analysis, economic and political models emerged over the period studied in this course option, models which created structural economic dependency of African societies on metropolitan Europe. This dependency is one which continued from the precolonial, through the colonial, and into the postcolonial era, and continued on this analysis to shape current African political histories. However, dependency theory then became criticised

in the 1980s by historians who said that it denied the possibility that African peoples had agency and volition in building their own histories and institutions. Indeed, much of the historical literature on Africa since that time has endeavoured to demonstrate “African agency” in the face of the structural violence and inequalities of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism.

The study of African political history and kingdoms therefore allows us to think about this issue of “dependency” in both the past and the present. The kingdoms examined in this course show that aspects of dependency theory are worth considering carefully. In Benin and Kongo, as we have seen, the long-term trade with the European merchants had major impacts: in Kongo, it precipitated a crisis whereby the traditional lineage system challenged the newly centralised kingship structure, and in Benin the economic demand for slaves shifted commercial patterns in the 18th century. In Songhay, meanwhile, economic and intellectual links with North Africa precipitated the final crisis of the kingdom with the Moroccan invasion of 1591.

Nevertheless, the importance of balancing these processes against the strength and power of African institutions has also been very clear. In each of the kingdoms examined, the power and strength of autochthonous systems of belief and government has been abundantly in evidence. The way in which these institutions changed and adapted demonstrates the power and importance of African political models. Considering this, the question arises as to how deep-rooted the political reforms of colonialism could really be, when set against such a longstanding and complex political culture. This has indeed been one of the major questions raised by important political scientists of Africa such as Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz.

In the end, although precolonial West African history seems very distant from modern debates and imperatives, its study is fundamental to any type of intervention in the African present. Recently, the historian Alexander Keese has argued that precolonial state formations are deeply connected to the prevalence and intensity of ethnicity in African political discourses. At the same time, the importance of West African surplus extraction to global economic change derives a new perspective through considering deep historical roots: for many centuries this process has continued, with the surplus shifting over time, be it in human beings, agricultural production for food on the middle passage, palm oil in the 19th century for new industries, or the minerals and oil of the 21st century. The way in which extraction of economic surplus is therefore related to both the global economy and the rise of African political elites in the past and in the present

offers historical frameworks for understanding present relationships.

In the end, however, the best reasons to study the deep West African past may be simply the sheer fascination for this rich and under-explored past. Studying a region so complex and different to those so often studied in History syllabi refreshes our fascination for the human condition and its deep complexity. In studying a subject so different, the diversity of the human condition and of human possibilities is affirmed afresh. Where historical change has often been characterised by the convergence of human experiences, it is salutary to study just how different these have been over time and space.

Resource List

Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz: *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. (Oxford: James Currey, 1999)

Jan Glete: *War and the State in early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2002)

Alexander Keese: *Ethnicity and the Colonial State* (Leiden: Brill, 2015)

Walter Rodney: *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. (Dar-es-Salaam/London: Bogle L'Ouverture, 1973)



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