

Empires of West Africa:

The empires of West Africa were Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. The dominant tribe of all the empires was the Soninke. The empires lasted from around 830 AD to 1600. The people of the West African empires were mainly agricultural. They used iron tools to grow millet, sorghum, and rice. Usually, the men would do the heavy labor on the farm, such as clearing land, tilling, and hoeing. Women and children would plant crops and do the weeding. In the 14th century, a traveler named Leo Africanus commented: "The region itself yieldeth great abundance of corn, flesh, and cotton. Here are many artificers and merchants in all places and yet the king honourably entertaineth all strangers. The inhabitants are rich, and have plenty of wares."

GHANA

The Empire of Ghana lasted from around 830 to 1235. The Empire of Ghana was the first dominant empire that emerged in Western Africa. Around 800 AD Ghana's king had a large army that demanded taxes and gifts from the surrounding land. Ghana's upper class citizens benefited from trade. They imported luxurious food, such as dates, raisins, and wheat, from Arab states. Another important trade within the West African Empires was the Gold-Salt trade. Gold came from between the Niger River and the Senegal River. Western Africa lacked salt so the trade of Gold for Salt from the Sahara began. Arab and Berber traders imported salt to Western Africa, and the Western Africans traded their gold with the rest of the world. The Camel was the transportation used for the Gold-Salt trade. The Camel was very useful because it could travel up to 60 miles a day in the harsh desert and could store fat in its hump, allowing it to go 10 days without water. Ghana flourished because of the Gold-Salt trade, but it was too dependent on this one exchange. The Almoravids, a Muslim dynasty, started a conquest of Ghana, and even though they failed to take it over, they irrevocably disrupted the Gold-Salt trade. Ghana's economy and trading relationships never recovered.

SONGHAI

Islam was able to spread through the West African Empires through Muslim merchants. The profitable trade routes attracted the Islamic people. Because of the trade between the Arab Muslims in the north and the people of the Ghana at the time, the citizens eventually converted to Islam. Later, when Islam reached the leaders of West Africa, they were the first to convert from Animism to Islam. The Empire of Songhai rose in the year 1009 A.D when Islam became accepted as the religion of West Africa; it was the first empire in West Africa that viewed Islam as their dominant religion. West Africa was very diverse and accepted all different religions. Although the rulers of Songhai were Islamic, many people of the empire did not convert, and continued to practice Animism as their major belief system. Many people of the Empire of Songhai such as the Soninke started combining ideas of Animism and Islam and created a new hybrid ideology.

MALI

The famous West African Empire Mali lasted from 1235 to 1500. Mali was founded by Sundiata Kieta in 1235 right after The Empire of Ghana fell. Mali's revenue was mostly from the gold and salt trade with the Sahara desert. Mali was based on the banks of the Niger River that ran through the center of the empire. This river gave them fertile land, and easy transportation of raw materials. The population of Mali was very diverse which created many different religions. Most of the people believed in some form of Animism, but nobles and Religious leaders adopted Islam as their main religion. Although Gold brought Mali almost all of its income, it also was a disadvantage. Because it was so valuable, Gold caused the advanced Portuguese Army to attack and conquer the empire of Mali. It can be said that Gold is to blame for both the rise and the decline of West African power.