

West African Religion Fact Sheet

Ghana: 830 C.E. to 1235 C.E.

The capital city of the Kingdom of Ghana was Al-Ghaba. In Arabic, this word means, “the forest.” “The Soninke recognized a supreme god who created the world and put order to all things in the universe. Then the great god left lesser deities in charge of running things. Everything had a spirit – animals, trees, rocks, birds, even the air, sun and moon.” The Soninke considered blacksmiths to be skilled with magic, since they understood how to use fire to turn raw iron ore into tools and weapons essential for daily life. Blacksmiths were, therefore, the caretakers of important spiritual sites and objects. These objects were not directly worshipped but were used to help spiritual leaders communicate with spirits. Kings themselves were seen as divine and were buried in the same forest. There was not any official religion that the King’s subjects had to follow.

The Kings wanted trade to increase, but most of the traders coming across the Sahara were Muslim. The Kings were worried about their citizens converting to Islam and becoming more obedient to this new religion than their old king. The Muslim immigrants also wanted to stay separate from the pagan practices of the Soninke people. “Muslims were allowed to build several mosques in Koumbi Saleh, and Arab historians reported that the king even provided one at Al-Ghaba where visiting Muslims could worship. Most of the Soninke people, including the king, however, were faithful to their traditional religion.” Many Muslim lawyers and scholars lived in Koumbi Saleh but worked as advisors to the King in Al-Ghaba. The Government resisted the influence of Islam for a time, but the Almoravids, a people group from across the Sahara, eventually convinced the government to accept Islam as their official religion. It is uncertain whether the Almoravids invaded Al-Ghaba or only gradually influenced them through business relationships.

Mali: 1230 C.E. to 1468 C.E.

“The Mandinka prospered for many centuries, then, during the reign of Mansa Barmandana, a drought devastated the land. A visitor, probably an Almoravid ambassador, told the king that if he converted to Islam, the drought would be broken. Mansa Barmandana became a Muslim, and the drought did come to an end. Many Mandinka followed their king’s example and accepted Islam too, but others remained loyal to their traditional beliefs. The Mandinka leaders were praised among the Almoravids because of their willingness to convert. Their Soninke cousins became Muslims only by force.”

People in Mali (aka Mandinka) viewed spiritual life and everyday life as fully connected, and their cultural beliefs about spirits carried into the way they practiced Islam. They attributed suffering, like sickness, famine, and failure, as the work of evil spirits. The Mandinka people would go to spiritual advisors to help them overcome struggles in their lives. These advisors cast bones marked with symbols and interpreted the results as a spirit’s direction for the future. Devout Muslims, whether from Mali or from across the Sahara, criticized Mandinka who combined Islam and their original religion. Even a few kings, such as Sundiata Keita, were criticized and accused of being a heretic since they did not abandon traditional practices when they converted to Islam. Another king of the Mali, Mansa Musa, made his commitment to Islam clear, and was able to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties with other Islamic nations in the Middle East by taking a lavish Hajj for two years.

Songhai: 1464 C.E. to 1591 C.E.

The Songhai people also had blended traditional spiritual beliefs with Islam since the 11th century C.E.. Two of their kings approached religion very differently. The first king of the Songhai, Sunni Ali, was invited by the Muslims of Timbuktu to rescue them from the Tuareg, who had defeated the Mali Empire and captured the David Conrad, “Empires of Medieval West Africa.” (Facts on File, 2005).

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city. Sunni Ali plundered the city instead of rescuing it, out of revenge for an old offense, and was titled a tyrant by the Muslims who felt that he had betrayed his faith. He was well known for combining traditional religious practices and Islam. Askia Muhammad, however, was a devout Muslim, and established Islam as the official religion of the noble class, though he did not force the religion on any of his citizens.

David Conrad, "Empires of Medieval West Africa." (Facts on File, 2005).

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