

West African Merchants/Artisans Fact Sheet

Ghana: 300-1200 CE.

“The Artisans were important because their work was considered a gift from God... The supreme god left the world unfinished for mankind to complete... The weavers like the blacksmiths of Ghana, were thought to have magical powers... They were both respected and feared. Other important artisans were leatherworkers, woodworkers, and public entertainers. Creative people were honored, and their work was considered divine.”¹

While local merchants were honored, “Ghana kings, did not permit North African and Saharan (Foreign) merchants to stay overnight in the city. This gave rise to one of the major features of Ghana—the dual city; Ghana Kings benefited from Muslim traders but kept them outside centers of power.”²

Mali: 1200-1500 CE.

“Mali was divided into provinces, just as Ghana had been before it. Mansa Musa appointed provinces, just as Ghana had been before, Musa appointed governors called *ferbas* to manage the day-to-day operations of these regions. Each important town had inspectors called *mochrifs*, and they were royal tax collectors stationed at every marketplace.

Trade tripled in Mali during Mansa Musa’s reign. The whole Sudan was crisscrossed by trade routes, bringing caravans from the four corners of the known world. Camel trains emerged out of the desert, bringing goods, news, and visitors to Mali’s markets. One of the prolific writers to reach Mali was Ibn Battuta.”³

Songhai: 1464-1591 CE.

“By 1476, Sunni Ali controlled the inland delta region of the Niger to the west of Timbuktu and the lakes region to the south. Regular patrols by his navy kept the trade routes open and tribute-paying kingdoms peaceful. This is an extremely fertile region of West Africa, and it became a major producer of grain under his rule.”⁴

¹ Patricia McKissack and Fredrick McKissack, *The Royal Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai* (New York, New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1994), 68-70.

² Margari Hill, “The Spread of Islam in West Africa: Containment, Mixing, and Reform from the Eighth to the Twentieth Century,” Stanford Program on International and Cross-Culture Education, January 2009, https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/the_spread_of_islam_in_west_africa_containment_mixing_and_reform_from_the_eighth_to_the_twentieth_century.

³ Patricia McKissack and Fredrick McKissack, *The Royal Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai* (New York, New York: Henry Hold and Company, 56.

⁴ Alistair Boddy-Evans, “Biography of Sonni Ali, Songhai Monarch,” ThoughtCo, June 13, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-sonni-ali-44234>.

“The wealth made through trade was used to build larger kingdoms. To protect their trade interests, these kingdoms built strong armies. Kingdoms that desired more control of the trade also developed strong armies to expand their kingdoms and protect them from competition.”⁵

“The Songhai Kingdom now had effective control over the productive Niger River trade of gold, kola, grain, and enslaved people. The cities were also part of the important trans-Saharan trade route system which brought south caravans of salt and copper, as well as goods from the Mediterranean coast.”⁶

“Long distance trade helped the local economy and supported internal trade. Merchants travelling between towns across the Sahara needed places to rest and stock up with food for the journey across the Sahara Desert. Food would be provided by local markets that relied on local farms for supplies. This practice allowed merchants to plan long trips knowing that local markets would provide food and shelter.”⁷

⁵ “Songhai, African Empire, 15-16th Century,” South African History Online, November 8, 2011, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/songhai-african-empire-15-16th-century#:~:text=It%20was%20a%20great%20cosmopolitan,faithful%20to%20their%20traditional%20religion>.

⁶ Alistair Boddy-Evans, “Biography of Sonni Ali, Songhai Monarch,” ThoughtCo, June 13, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-sonni-ali-44234>.

⁷ “Songhai, African Empire, 15-16th Century,” South African History Online, November 8, 2011, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/songhai-african-empire-15-16th-century#:~:text=It%20was%20a%20great%20cosmopolitan,faithful%20to%20their%20traditional%20religion>.