**The Kingdom of Songhay**

Now take a look back again at the map of Africa's empires and kingdoms. You will see that the Kingdom of Songhay encompassed part of the Kingdom of Mali, as well as land beyond to the east and north. The dates for the Kingdom of Songhay partly overlap those of Mali, although the information that follows will reveal at what point Songhay gained control over certain portions of the old Kingdom of Mali. The dates for the Kingdom of Songhay are between 1350 and 1600 CE.

The exact origins of the Kingdom of Songhay are not clear to historians, although there are records of the King Kossoi accepting Islam around 1009 CE. This began an integration of commerce and religion to gain and maintain power that would continue throughout the history of the Kingdom of Songhay. Islam became a unifying force for the people and an important factor for maintaining state power.

The first of two great rulers in the Kingdom of Songhay was Sonni Ali. He came to power in 1464 CE and made the Songhay perhaps the most powerful state in western/central Africa at the time. He seized Timbuktu and Djenne, which had been parts of the Kingdom of Mali. These, as well as the capital city of Gao, continued to be important centers of learning and commerce. Sonni Ali was not a devout Muslim himself, but was sympathetic to indigenous religious practices. Most of all, he was concerned about his own ambitions to build a great empire.

His successor was Mohammed Askia, who came to power in 1493 CE. He expanded the kingdom even further and set up an even more advanced and strongly centralized government. He developed a new system of laws, expanded the military, and encouraged scholarship and learning. Unlike Sonni Ali, he was a devout Muslim, who used the combination of Islam and commerce to build his kingdom. He brought peace and stability to the kingdom during his reign.

The Kingdom of Songhay came to an end when the Moroccans invaded and conquered them. By 1600 CE, the days of the great kingdoms of West Africa were over.