

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON  
WEST AFRICAN  
HISTORY



Festschrift in Honour  
of Prof. S.C  
Ukpabi

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New Perspective on West African History:  
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## Geography and Potentates in West Africa: A Concise Study in History and International Relations

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### Abstract

This paper examines the interconnectedness between geography and state formations. Potentates such as Tekrur, Wolof, Serer, Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Hausa, Kanuri and Bornu Empire are x-rayed in this chapter through the lens of history. This chapter is set to provide new insight on already existing topics on the aforementioned pre colonial states in West Africa. They include sub themes such as trade and trade routes, climate and settlement pattern, economy, strategy, public and policy analysis, foreign relations, religion, leadership and statecraft. Although this chapter appears to be recycling existing knowledge in the field, it recreates a new intellectual dialogue with regards to the recent nomenclature attached to historical scholarship such as History and International Studies, Diplomatic studies, Strategic Studies, International Relations etc. Hence, this paper, examines these new yardsticks attached to History as an academic discipline with the consciousness that the subject as well as the teaching of the discipline has been static for a long time.

### Introduction

The coastal, forest and Sudan Savannah zones of West Africa are examined in this paper. States of Senegal and Gambia such as Ghana, Mali and Songhai are not left out. Also discussed are states of Mossi, Tekrur, and Fulani as well as states of Central Sudan which includes Kanem Bornu and the Hausa states. By operational definition, the coastal zones cover the geographical area that extends inland between twenty and eighty miles. It covers the land plains in Senegambia, Mangrove swamps in Portuguese Guinea, Sierraleone and the Niger Delta, and of Lagoons and creates from Ivory Coast to the Niger Delta. Notable people in the coastal zones include the Jola, Pepel, Serer (Senegambia) and the Shebro and Bulom of Sierraleone.

Next to the coastal zone is the forest zone in West Africa. This zone is dichotomized into those living in the Western forest facing the Atlantic Ocean and those living in the forest belt which faces the Gulf of Guinea. The people of the western forest include the Baule, Asante, Fon, Yoruba, Edo and Ibo.<sup>3</sup> The people of

Sudan belt is another category of people in the geographical division of West Africa. They include the Wolof, Tukolor, Fulani, the Soninke, Malinke, Bamba, the Songhai and the Hausa.<sup>4</sup>

West Africa is presently the modern day Benin republic, Gambia, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Capeverde, Coted'ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Mauritana, Niger, Senegal, Sierraleone, and Togo. West Africa is west of an imagined north-south axis lying close to 10° east longitude. The Atlantic Ocean forms the western as well as the southern borders of the West African region. The northern border is the Sahara Desert with the Ranishanu bend generally considered the northern most part of the region. The eastern border is less precise with some placing it at the Benue trough and others on a line running from mount Cameroon to Lake Chad.<sup>5</sup>

The geography of a particular area has a lot to do with its history especially its settlement and living pattern. These also include its trade routes, adptation and agriculture. The West African case study is not an exception. Norah Latham argues that:

In historical times West Africa has always been known as Negro-land, though Negro races live right across Africa from the Atlantic to the Red sea between latitudes 17° and 5° north. But by far largest proportion live in West Africa. We know that the Negroes have been settled for a very longtime, but that small groups of other people coming from the northeast infiltrated from time to time. Most of the pure Negroes live in the forest areas wall were not easily penetrated by invaders. In the Senegal region are the Serer, Woloffs, and Tuclors east of them are the Mandigoes them to the South, in and near the forest of Kru, Akan, Ga, Ewe, Fon, Yoruba and Ibo. Most of the people to the north of them, though apparently Negro have a tradition of intermixture with white races.<sup>6</sup>

The various states in the region evolved as a result of other factors such as trade contacts, agrarain quest, external infiltration and huge demographic



movements. In this chapter, efforts are made to discuss only few prominent states of the pre colonial West Africa since other papers in this collection addresses them a great deal.

### **Tekrur**

Tekrur was formed through the interaction of Berbers from the Sahara and "Negro agricultural peoples" who were "essentially Serer"., Takrur prospered throughout the 9th and 10th centuries. The Islamization of the state warranted King War Jabi conversion to Islam and by 1035, he introduced the sharia system. The adoption of Islam greatly benefited the state economically and created greater political ties with other neighbouring states. The king of Tekrur sided with the Berber and Tuareg tribes of the Almoravids in their political intervention of the Ghana Empire. When Ghanaian power faded, Takrur was left as the sole power in the region.<sup>7</sup> Integration of Takrur with the Almoravids meant that some of these troops reached all the way to Andalusia (Spain) with the Almoravid expansion. Among these were the Susu who carved out the sizeable though short-lived Kaniaga. Waalo, the first Wolof state, emerged out its south. By the time Mandinka tribes united to form the Mali empire in 1235, Takrur was in a steep decline. The state was finally conquered by the usurper emperor Sabakoura of Mali in the 1280s. Takrur was later conquered by Mali, it was also conquered by Jolof in the 15th century. Although *Koli* (a Fula rebel) did finally managed to regain Takrur and named it Fouta Toro in the 15th century thereby setting up the first Fula dynasty (Denanke), that dynasty also did not last and in 1776 at the Fouta Revolution, who were Muslim clerics entered the kingdom and brought down the house of Denanke.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Wolof**

The Wolof Empire was a medieval West African state that extended its power to parts of Senegal and The Gambia from approximately 1350 to 1890. While only ever consolidated into a single state structure for part of this time, the tradition of governance, caste, and culture of the Wolof dominate the history of north-central Senegal for much of the last 800 years. Its final demise at the hands of French colonial forces in the 1870s-1890s also marked the beginning of the formation of Senegal as a unified state.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of the 15th century, the Wolof states of Jolof, Kayor, Baol and Walo had become united in a federation with Jolof as the metropolitan power.

The position of king was held by the Burba Wolof and the rulers of the other component states owed loyalty to him while being allowed local sovereignty in internal state matters. Saloum and Sine were later brought within the union. Before they became involved in trading with the Portuguese merchants on the coast, the Wolof people enjoyed the benefits of long established trading and cultural ties with the Western Sudanese empires and had also benefited from trading with Futa Toro and the Berbers from North Africa.<sup>10</sup> Through these early trading links and organisation the Wolof states grew wealthy and had formidable strength.

### **The Serer**

Serer as a state did not last for so long a time. Many leading text on West African history omitted this important kingdom of West Africa. Originally they settled north of Senegal but were compelled to move to Futa toro and there, they became subjects of Tukolor. The Wolof domination of Serer made the state to be one of the least studied in West African history. Serer comprises groups such as Sine, Saloum as well as the Gelowar from the Mandigo group who dominated the political class.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the political configuration of the Serer was highly organised. There was the Bur who must be from the Gelowar class (the royal blood) as well as other political positions such as the Grand Farba (in charge of the royal slaves) and Farba Birkeur (master of the Royal house hold). The Serer society politically were female gender friendly. There was the position of the Queen mother known as linger.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Ghana Empire**

Ghana Empire was first occupied by the Soninke until 770 AD. There was the Goddala, Lemtuna and Senuofa who questioned the Soninke's occupation of Awdaghast. The Soninke continue to dominate political terrain as pagans until the Islamic revolutionist Almoravids invaded in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. They were led by Ibn Yacin who captured Awdaghast in 1055 and who was invited by Yahaya the ruler of Sanhaja Berbers.<sup>13</sup>

The death of Ibn Yacin brought to power Abu Bakr who led a split group of the Almoravids. Abu Bakr was hell bent in Islamizing the Soninke group and he attacked Kumbi Saleh (Ghana's capital) in 1062 and 1076 Kumbi fell. The death of Abu Bakr in 1088 created fresh problems for the Almoravids.<sup>14</sup>

Subsequent leaders of Ghana were non-challant to maintain basic infrastructures such as irrigation and wells which was the basic ingredients of the nation's economy. Furthermore, there were several conquests that hampered the growth of trans-Saharan trade which the economy relied upon especially the Samanguru ascendancy to power in 1203 which was arbitrarily in its operation further paved way for the conquest of Ghana in 1240.<sup>15</sup>

### **Mali Empire**

The Mali Empire lasted from c. 1230 C.E. to c. 1600 C.E. The empire was founded by Sundiata Keita and became renowned for the wealth of its rulers, especially Mansa Musa I. The Mali Empire had many profound cultural influences on West Africa, allowing the spread of its language, laws and customs along the Niger River. It extended over a large area and consisted of numerous vassal kingdoms and provinces. The Mali Empire grew out of an area referred to by its contemporary inhabitants as *Manden* (*Manden*, named for its inhabitants the Mandinka (initially *Manden'ka* with "ka" meaning people of), comprised most of present-day northern Guinea and southern Mali<sup>16</sup>). The empire was originally established as a federation of Mandinka tribes called the *Manden Kurufaba* (*Manden* being the country, *kurufaba* meaning assembly and *faba* meaning great entirety), but it later became an empire ruling millions of people from nearly every ethnic group in West Africa.

The history of Mali empire recorded too many leaders such as Sundiata (1230-1255), Mansa Uli (1255-1270), Mansa Khalifa (1274-1275), Abu Bakar (1275-1285), Mansa Musa (1312-1337), Maghan I (1337-1341), Sulaiman (1341-1359), Mari Jata II (1360-1374), Musa II (1374 to 1387), and Maghan III (1390-1400). Nevertheless, among these leaders, the performance of Sundiata and Mansa Musa has elicited more scholarly enquiry.

Mali Empire came to limelight with the conquest of Kangaba under a dictatorial leader known as Samanguru in 1235. Sundiata amalgamated Kangaba with other village groups such as Susu, Kumbi, Kurina, and Kulikoro. He established his capital at Niani and during his reign, Mali Empire extended to part of Ghana and the salt mines of Taghaza, copper mines of Takadda and important trading towns such as Walata, Jenne and Gao. His demise in 1255 witnessed a slow pace of administration as shown with respect to political chronology of leadership above. Nevertheless, another much-discussed leader Mansa Musa came on board in later years.

Mansa Musa of Mali (1312-1337) is one of the most widely discussed West African leader of all times. Many writers insist that Mansa Musa was a profligate, while others saw him as a statesman or empire builder. The present writers do not concur to any side of the story, rather emphasis in this chapter, is on his statecraft and foreign policy objectives. He led Mandingo army into Timbuktu and made the city the epicentre of the trans-Saharan trade. This was the first step he took on inception to office.

Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca has been perceived among scholars as a trip of a Squandermania. He is said to have gone to Mecca with 500 slaves and 500 more with each carrying gold weighing 36kg, about 100 camels with a load of gold of about 136kg each accompanied him to Mecca. Many scholars have over-exaggerated Mansa Musa's expenditure to Mecca between 1324 to 1326.<sup>17</sup> G.A. Stride and Ifeka Caroline are among such scholars. They wrote as follows:

He was not the first Mansa of Mali to go on pilgrimage, but no West African ruler ever went to Mecca on such a lavish scale. He took an escort of about sixty thousand courtiers and servants, richly dressed and carrying three million pounds-worth of gold in modern value. Everywhere he went, he became legendary for his generosity and the extravagant spending of his retinue. Where ever he halted on a Friday, he paid for the construction of a mosque; and his party spent so much gold in Cairo that the value of the precious metal fell there. So much did Mansa Musa disburse in charity, gifts and purchases that he had to borrow gold to pay the cost of his homeward journey.<sup>18</sup>

Mansa Musa may not have spent so much as claimed. There is need to look at the foreign policy objectives of Mansa Musa. He was able to establish diplomatic relationships with Tripoli, Morocco, Egypt, Mecca, Spain and Kano. Mali under Musa was known all over the world especially appearance of Mali in Italian and Spanish maps. That notwithstanding, he was able to attract investors more than any ruler of Mali in the period of study. It is evident that successors to Mansa Musa were not able



to sustain leadership qualities to keep the Empire in shape. There is no historical records till date that shows that Mansa Musa's successors complained of loot during his tenure. As part of his statecraft, he Islamized Mali not for religious reasons but he understood that the control of commerce and being a muslim at that period, worked in parri-passau.

## **Songhai Empire**

The Songhai Empire settled at Gao as early as 800 CE, but did not establish it as the capital until the 11th century, during the reign of Dia Kossoi. However, the Dia dynasty soon gave way to the Sonni, preceding the ascension of Sulaiman-Mar, who gained independence and hegemony over the city. Mar is often credited with wresting power away from the Mali Empire and gaining independence for the small Songhai kingdom at the time. In 1340, the Songhai took advantage of the Mali Empire's decline and successfully asserted its independence. Disputes over succession weakened the Mali Empire, and many of its peripheral subjects broke away. The Songhai made Gao their capital and began an imperial expansion of their own throughout the western Sahel and by 1420, Songhai was strong enough to exact tribute from Masina.<sup>20</sup>

### **Sonni Ali**

The first emperor of Songhai was Sonni Ali, reigning from about 1464 to 1493. In the late 1460s, he conquered many of the Songhai's neighboring states, including what remained of the Mali Empire. Sonni Ali quickly established himself as the empire's most formidable military strategist and conqueror. His empire was the largest empire that Africa has ever seen.

During his campaigns for expansion, Ali conquered many lands, repelling attacks from the Mossi to the south and overcoming the Dogon people to the north. He annexed Timbuktu in 1468, after Islamic leaders of the town requested his assistance in overthrowing marauding Tuaregs who had taken the city following the decline of Mali. However, Ali met stark resistance after setting his eyes on the wealthy and renowned trading town of Djenne (also known as Jenne). After a persistent seven-year siege, he was able to forcefully incorporate it into his vast empire in 1473, but only after having starved its citizens into surrender.<sup>21</sup>

The invasion of Sonni Ali and his forces caused harm to the city of Timbuktu, and he was described as an intolerant tyrant in many African accounts. Sonni Ali conducted a repressive policy against the scholars of Timbuktu, especially those of the Sankore region who were associated with the Tuareg. With his control of critical trade routes and cities such as Timbuktu, Sonni Ali brought great wealth to the Songhai Empire, which at its height would surpass the wealth of Mali. In oral tradition, Sonni Ali is often known as a powerful politician and great military commander. Whatever the case may have been, his legend consists of him being a fearless conqueror who united a great empire, sparking a legacy that is still intact today. Under his reign, Djenne and Timbuktu were on their way to becoming great centers of learning.<sup>22</sup>

### **Askia Muhammad the Great**

After taking the throne Muhammad is known as Askia the Great, even though he had no real right to be the king. Not only was he not in the royal family blood line, he did not hold the sacred symbols which entitled one to become a ruler. Furthermore, he was most likely a descendant of Soninke lineage rather than Songhay, which means that by Songhay standards his family background would have not allowed him to be King. But Askia managed to bypass that law and take the throne.<sup>23</sup>

He organized the territories that Sonni Ali had previously conquered and extended his power as far to the south and east. He was not as tactful as Ali in the means of the military, but he did find success in alliances, because of these alliances he was able to capture and conquer more vastly. Unlike Ali however, he was a devout Muslim. Askia opened religious schools, constructed Mosques, and opened up his court to scholars and poets from throughout the Muslim world. He sent his children to an Islamic School and enforced Islamic practices. Yet he was tolerant of other religions and did not force Islam on his people. He donated some to charity and used the rest for lavish gifts to impress the people of Mecca with the wealth of the Songhay. Islam was so important to him that upon his return he recruited Muslim scholars from Egypt and Morocco to teach at the Sankore Mosque in Timbuktu as well as setting up many other learning centers throughout his empire. Among his great accomplishments was an interest in astronomical knowledge which led to a flourishing of astronomers and observatories in the capital.<sup>24</sup>

Not only was he a patron of Islam, he also was gifted in administration and encouraging trade. He centralized the administration of the empire and established an efficient bureaucracy which was responsible for among other things tax collection and the administration of justice. He also demanded for canals to be built in order to enhance agriculture, which would eventually increase trade. More importantly than anything he did for trade was the introduction of weights and measures and appointing an inspector for each of its important trading centers. During his reign Islam became more widely entrenched, trans-Saharan trade flourished, and the Saharan salt mines of Taghaza were brought within the boundaries of the empire. Unfortunately as Askia the Great grew older his power declined. In 1528 his sons revolted against him and declared Musa, one of Askia's many sons, as king. Following Musa's overthrow in 1531, Songhay's empire went into decline. Following multiple attempts at governing the Empire by Askia's sons and grandsons there was little hope for a return to the power it once held. Between the political chaos and multiple civil wars within the empire it came as a surprise when Morocco invaded Songhay unexpectedly. The main reason for the Moroccan invasion of Songhay was to seize control of and revive the trans-Saharan trade in gold. The Songhay military, during Askia's reign consisted of full-time soldiers, but the king never modernized his army. The Empire fell to the Moroccans and their firearms in 1591.<sup>25</sup>

An additional *qadi* was noted as a necessity in order to settle minor disputes between immigrant merchants. Kings usually did not judge a defendant; however, under special circumstances, such as acts of treason, they felt an obligation to do so and thus exert their authority. Results of a trial were announced by the "town crier" and punishment for most trivial crimes usually consisted of confiscation of merchandise or even imprisonment, since various prisons existed throughout the Empire.<sup>26</sup>

*Qadis* worked at the local level and were positioned in important trading towns, such as Timbuktu and Djenné. The Qadi was appointed by the king and dealt with common-law misdemeanors according to Sharia law. The Qadi also had the power to grant a pardon or offer refuge. The *Assara-munidios*, or "enforcers" worked along the lines of a police commissioner whose sole duty was to execute sentencing. Jurists were mainly composed of those representing the academic

community; professors were often noted as taking administrative positions within the Empire and many aspired to be *qadis*.<sup>27</sup>

Upper classes in society converted to Islam while lower classes often continued to follow traditional religions. Sermons emphasized obedience to the king. Timbuktu was the educational capital. Sonni Ali established a system of government under the royal court, later to be expanded by Askia Muhammad, which appointed governors and mayors to preside over local tributary states, situated around the Niger valley.

Tax was imposed onto peripheral chiefdoms and provinces to ensure the dominance of Songhai, and in return these provinces were given almost complete autonomy. Songhai rulers only intervened in the affairs of these neighboring states when a situation became volatile; usually an isolated incident. Each town was represented by government officials, holding positions and responsibilities similar to today's central bureaucrats. Under Askia Muhammad, the Empire saw increased centralization. He encouraged learning in Timbuktu by rewarding its professors with larger pensions as an incentive. He also established an order of precedence and protocol and was noted as a noble man who gave back generously to the poor.

### The Kanuri

Originally a pastoral people, the Kanuri were one of many Nilo-Saharan groups indigenous to the Central South Sahara, beginning their expansion in the area of Lake Chad in the late 7th century, and absorbing both indigenous Nilo-Saharan and Chadic (Afro-Asiatic) speakers. According to Kanuri tradition, Sef, son of Dhu Ifazan of Yemen, arrived in Kanem in the ninth century and united the population into the Sayfawa dynasty. This tradition however, is likely a product of later Islamic influence, reflecting the association with their Arabian origins in the Islamic era.<sup>28</sup> Evidence of indigenous state formation in the Lake Chad area dates back to the early first century B.C. (ca. 800 B.C.) at Zilum. Kanuri became Muslims in the 11th century, Kanem became a centre of Muslim learning and the Kanuri soon controlled all the area surrounding Lake Chad and a powerful empire called Kanem-Bornu Empire which reached its height in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when they ruled much of Central Africa.

## The Kanem-Bornu Empire

Based on hereditary nobility, Dabbalemi was able to suppress this tendency, but after his death, dissension among his sons weakened the Sayfawa Dynasty. Dynastic feuds degenerated into civil war, and Kanem's outlying peoples soon ceased paying tribute.<sup>15</sup>

### From Sayfuwa to Kanem Bornu

By the end of the 14th century, internal struggles and external attacks had torn Kanem apart. Between 1359 and 1383, seven *mais* reigned, but Bulala invaders (from the area around Lake Fitri to the east) killed five of them. This proliferation of *mais* resulted in numerous claimants to the throne and led to a series of internecine wars. Finally, around 1380 the Bulala forced *Mai* Umar Idrismi to abandon Njimi and move the Kanembu people to Bornu on the western edge of Lake Chad. Over time, the intermarriage of the Kanembu and Bornu peoples created a new people and language, the Kanuri.<sup>16</sup>

But even in Bornu, the Sayfawa Dynasty's troubles persisted. During the first three-quarters of the 15th century, for example, fifteen *mais* occupied the throne. Then, around 1460 *Mai* Ali Dunamami defeated his rivals and began the consolidation of Bornu. He built a fortified capital at Ngazargamu, to the west of Lake Chad (in present-day Niger), the first permanent home a Sayfawa *mai* had enjoyed in a century. So successful was the Sayfawa rejuvenation that by the early 16th century *Mai* Idris Katakarmabe (1487-1509) was able to defeat the Bulala and retake Njimi, the former capital. The empire's leaders, however, remained at Ngazargamu because its lands were more productive agriculturally and better suited to the raising of cattle.<sup>17</sup>

Kanem-Bornu peaked during the reign of the outstanding statesman *Mai* Idris Alooma (c. 1564-1596). Aluma is remembered for his military skills, administrative reforms, and Islamic piety. His main adversaries were the Hausa to the west, the Tuareg and Toubou to the north, and the Bulala to the east.

Aluma introduced a number of legal and administrative reforms based on his religious beliefs and Islamic law (sharia). He sponsored the construction of numerous mosques and made a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he arranged for the establishment of a hostel to be used by pilgrims from his empire. As with other

dynamic politicians, Aluma's reformist goals led him to seek loyal and competent advisers and allies, and he frequently relied on slaves who had been educated in noble homes. Aluma regularly sought advice from a council composed of heads of the most important clans. He required major political figures to live at the court, and he reinforced political alliances through appropriate marriages (Aluma himself was the son of a Kanuri father and a Bulala mother).<sup>18</sup>

Kanem-Bornu under Aluma was strong and wealthy. Government revenue came from tribute of conquered people, sales of slaves, and duties on and participation in trans-Saharan trade. Aluma took a keen interest in trade and other economic matters. He is credited with having the roads cleared, designing better boats for Lake Chad, introducing standard units of measure for grain, and moving farmers into new lands. In addition, he improved the ease and security of transit through the empire with the goal of making it so safe that "a lone woman clad in gold might walk with none to fear but God."<sup>19</sup> The administrative reforms and military brilliance of Aluma sustained the empire until the mid-17th century, when its power began to fade. By the late 18th century, Bornu rule extended only westward, into the land of the Hausa. Around that time, Fulani people, invading from the west, were able to make major inroads into Bornu. By the early 19th century, Kanem-Bornu was clearly an empire in decline, and in 1808 Fulani warriors conquered Ngazargamu. Usman dan Fodio led the Fulani thrust and proclaimed a jihad (holy war) on the irreligious Muslims of the area. His campaign eventually affected Kanem-Bornu and inspired a trend toward Islamic orthodoxy. But Muhammad al-Kanem contested the Fulani advance. Kanem was a Muslim scholar and non-Sayfawa warlord who had put together an alliance of Shuwa Arabs, Kanembu, and other seminomadic peoples. He eventually built in 1814 a capital at Kukawa (in present-day Nigeria). Sayfawa *mais* remained titular monarchs until 1846. In that year, the last *mai*, in league with Ouaddai tribesmen, precipitated a civil war. It was at that point that Kanem's son, Umar, became king, thus ending one of the longest dynastic reigns in regional history.

Although the dynasty ended, the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu survived. But Umar, who eschewed the title *mai* for the simpler designation *shehu* (from the Arabic shaykh), could not match his father's vitality and gradually allowed the kingdom to be ruled by advisers (*wazirs*). Bornu began to decline, as a result of administrative disorganization, regional particularism, and attacks by the militant Ouaddai Empire



to the east. The decline continued under Umar's sons, and in 1893 Rabih az-Zubayr, leading an invading army from eastern Sudan, conquered Bornu. He was defeated by British soldiers in 1900.<sup>40</sup>

### **Hausa states**

The seven true Hausa states, or Hausa Bakwai include the Biram, Daura, Gobir, Kano, Katsina, Rano, and Zaria [Zazzau] and their seven outlying satellites, or Banza Bakwai (Zamfara, Kebbi, Yauri, Gwari, Nupe, Kororofa [Jukun], and Yoruba), and had no central authority. Between 500 CE and 700 CE Hausa people had been slowly moving west from Nubia and mixing in with the local Northern and Central Nigerian population. By the 12th century CE the Hausa were becoming one of Africa's major powers. The architecture of the Hausa is perhaps one of the least known but most beautiful of the medieval age.<sup>41</sup>

The myth of the Hausa's origin begins with their founder, Bayajidda, coming from the east to escape his father. He eventually came to Gaya, where he employed blacksmiths to form him a knife. With this knife, the legend purports that he freed the people from a sacred snake who guarded their well and prevented them from getting water six days per week in their land of Daura. The queen of Daura as a result offered herself in marriage to Bayajidda to show her appreciation. She eventually gave birth to seven sons, whom ruled the seven states that make up Hausaland.<sup>42</sup>

Though this makes for a good story, the fact is that it is not known when the movement of the ancestors of the Hausa people actually occurred; neither has the migrants' place of origin been pinpointed. The seven Habe kingdoms were formed by a merging of strangers with local natives. The emergence of states in Hausaland was apparently associated with the establishment of capital cities as centers of power. They were different from earlier settlements in that they were cosmopolitan, fortified, and each was the seat of a king who was recognized as the superior power throughout the surrounding area. This rise of the Hausa states occurred between 500 and 700 A.D. Though these kingdoms were growing, they didn't fully control the region until about 1200 A.D.<sup>43</sup>

By 1500 AD, Islam had been introduced to the Hausa by Arab traders. Many of the urban Hausa embraced Islam immediately, in hopes of enhancing their business. Villagers however were not as receptive to this new religion. In the "holy wars" of

1804 and 1808, the Hausa were conquered by the Fulani, their strong Islamic neighbours. Many of the villagers were forced or bribed into becoming Muslim. They adopted some of Islam's outward behaviors and rituals, but did not accept Islam wholeheartedly as many of the urban Hausa did. Also, many of the ruling Fulani have become culturally and linguistically Hausa. Today, the Hausa people are the fourth largest bloc of Islam in the world.<sup>44</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This chapter attempts a cursory mention of potentates in West Africa. The search for fertile land, trade and the spread of Islam led to the rise and fall of many kingdoms. Nevertheless, a survey of the trans Saharan trade reveals great diplomatic relationship between states in West Africa and the outside world such as Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Europe. Thus, many states of West Africa before the thirteenth century was already captured in the world map. The implication of this development is that it further paved way for the European maritime globalization which of course metamorphosed to the scramble and partition of the continent (Africa), the imperialistic Berlin conference of 1884/1885, colonialisation for more than a century and the persistent neo colonialisation.

## Endnotes

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