

## The Songhay Empire: Analysis Activity

### The Songhay Empire

The Songhay Empire was the last and most centrally controlled of the three great kingdoms of West Africa. It emerged out of the disorder created by the decline of the empire of Mali. The capital of the Songhay Empire was the walled city of Gao, which became a great marketplace.

### Economy

The economy of the Songhay Empire was based largely on tribute from the provinces of the empire, agricultural production along the Niger River, gold and salt trading, and taxing the many other commodities that moved from West Africa across the Sahara desert along the trans-Saharan caravan trade routes. These commodities included kola nuts from the south, cloth, cowries, horses, and slaves.

### Government

The Songhay Empire was founded by a great warrior named Sonni Ali. He pulled the empire together through force by fighting off Tuareg raiders and increasing his military rule. According to tradition, however, Sonni Ali upset many devout Muslims in the region. As a result, after his death, his heir was ousted by a great Muslim general named Muhammad Ture. This started the Askiya dynasty, which ruled until the empire collapsed at the end of the sixteenth century.

The Songhay empire was far more centralized than the earlier Mali or Ghana empires had been. In these earlier empires, the central government had been content to allow the local chieftains to rule the various localities around the vast empire. But the Songhay government sent out their own representatives to rule. Also, the Songhay empire was far more thoroughly Islamic than earlier empires. Under the Askiya

dynasty Timbuktu was made a center of Islamic learning for the kingdom. And the leadership of Songhay encouraged their subjects to embrace Islam, though they didn't forcefully impose it. Many people, especially the lower classes, continued practicing their traditional religions.

## **Decline of the Empire**

The Songhay empire had a difficult time keeping the empire together after Muhammad Ture died. There were constant dynastic disputes within the royal family that weakened the empire from within. The disputes eventually led to a civil war over succession to the throne. Sensing an opportunity, the sultan of the Saadi Dynasty of Morocco ordered an invasion of Songhay in 1591. A decisive battle was fought at Gao. The Songhay forces were defeated, and the Saadi Dynasty took control. Eventually, the Saadi Dynasty gave up trying to administer the sprawling, once-powerful Songhay Empire, and Songhay split up into dozens of smaller kingdoms.

## **Instructions**

In this activity you will read about some aspects of the Songhay Empire, including its collapse. Then you will write an analysis that pinpoints some possible reasons for the empire's downfall. As you read, take notes to aid in your analysis.

## **The Collapse of an Empire**

History is filled with stories of great empires that fall apart. But why do empires collapse? Write an analysis of the collapse of the Songhay Empire by answering the following questions and then summarizing your conclusions.



What role did trade play in organizing and administering the empire?
Are governments run by royal families more or less responsive to the needs of the people than elected governments? Why?
How do you think the civil war weakened the Songhay Empire?
Why do you think the Saadi Dynasty gave up trying to control the conquered Songhay Empire? Do you think this offers a clue to the collapse of the Songhay Empire?

### Applying Learning

Use what you have learned from the reading to answer the following essay question: "Why causes an empire to collapse?" Be sure to use examples from the reading to support your answer.

Blank writing lines for student use.

