

History, Society, Kinship, and Kingship in the Kingdom of Ghana

Modern historians believe that the Kingdom of Ghana (also called Kumbi or Wagadu), the first of the three major Sudanic kingdoms of West Africa, emerged around the year 300 CE and lasted until it was conquered by the Islamic Almoravids in the year 1076 CE. The kingdom emerged from groups living in the Sahel region of West Africa, the band of semi-arid grassland bordering the southern reaches of the Sahel Desert. The geographic location of the kingdom meant that the people of Ghana had prolonged contact with the Berber traders of the Sahara who traveled south looking to trade in gold from the Akan mines of the southern coast. Over time, the kingdom was able to profit from this trade and it grew to take over the rich Niger Valley region.

Sources on the Kingdom

Unlike the histories of the later Sudanic kingdoms of Mali and Songhai, for which there is ample documentation, the kingdom of Ghana has left a much smaller historical record. What historians know of the kingdom of Ghana comes from only a handful of written sources, passed-down oral histories, and modern archaeological and anthropological work. The written sources that do exist from this period were written exclusively by outsiders. These outsiders, like the Spanish-born Muslim traveler al-Bakri, were largely interested in the kingdom because of its great wealth in gold. As a result, they wrote primarily about the gold trade and the wealth and power of the rulers. They spoke very little about the general Ghanaian population, its social patterns, and the role of family and kinship. Because of this, the social, familial, and kinship relationships of the people of Ghana remain imperfectly understood and subject to a considerable amount of speculation.

The Soninké

The kingdom of Ghana was made up Soninké peoples. The Soninké are a northern Mande-speaking group that emerged in the region that is now modern day Mauritania and Mali. The oral histories of the Soninké claim

descent from the Berber of the north, but the archeological and linguistic evidence suggest that they likely emerged precisely in the place where their kingdom rose to prominence, the Sahel grasslands north of the upper bend of the Niger River and south of the Sahara Desert. The Soninké today are mostly agriculturalists, and it is likely that they were farmers, fishermen, and herdsman over a millennia ago during the height of the Kingdom of Ghana. For at least a millennia, the Soninké have influenced by Islam, first through contact with Berber traders, and later as a result of the Almoravid invasion and continued influence. These days, approximately half of all Soninké practice Islam.

Social Stratification

Understanding Soninké society during the height of the Kingdom of Ghana is challenging because of the lack of reliable sources. Ethnographers and anthropologists have used both oral histories and current social patterns as a window into understanding the Soninké of the past. This evidence suggest that the Soninké were a highly stratified society. Those that could trace their lineage to wealthy Islamic clerical families or to secular ruling families formed the core of the elite. Below this elite was a large class of commoners made up of artisans and laborers. Within this commoner class were several stratified social layers based on occupation. Blacksmiths occupied the highest position—an indication of the social value of iron—leatherworkers were near or at the bottom, and a range of other occupations composed layers in the middle. Below this commoner class were the slaves.

Kinship Among the Soninké

The Soninké trace their lineage through a *patrilineal* system. This means that they trace their kinship along the male line, as is done in Europe and most of the West. By contrast, a *matrilineal* system traces a family's lineage based on the female line. Most patrilineal societies are also *patrilocal*. This means that after a marriage, the wife leaves her family and comes to live with the male family. This is a common practice in patrilineal societies because the offspring of the union will be raised as members of the male line, not the female.

Kingship in the Kingdom

The kingdom of Ghana was led by a king, also known as the *ghana* (meaning “war chief”). The king led the army, controlled trade, and was the primary administrator of justice. Despite the broad powers of the king, his direct control over the kingdom did not extend beyond the capital city of Koumbi Saleh. Across the kingdom most power was spread out to the local chiefs. These chiefs made local decision, administered justice locally, and resolved disputes that arose in their areas. These local rulers were loyal to the king and were responsible for collecting the king’s taxes and providing soldiers for the kingdom’s defense. The loyalty of these vassal rulers was guaranteed through a practice of royal hostage taking. The sons of the vassals were sent to live in Koumbi Saleh under the protection of the king. This practice served two purposes; it kept the vassals loyal, and it trained the future local rulers in the ways of the kingdom.

The descriptions of the king from Al-Bakri’s writings describe a wealthy ruler dressed in gold. The king’s power, and his ability to hold onto power, was largely determined by how effectively he was able to collect revenue and tribute. He usually did this through the control of trade. Merchants from far and wide were eager to trade goods such as salt, horses, cloth, and weapons in exchange for the gold mined in Akan to the south of Ghana. Naturally, these goods moved through Ghana’s territory, and the king could profit from the trade through taxation.

Matrilineal Kingship?

Like most monarchies, Ghana’s kings were provided through hereditary royal succession. All available evidence suggests that the kings were all male. However, historians once held that the line of succession was matrilineal. The evidence for this claim came from Al-Bakri, who suggested that kingship was passed down to the son of the king’s sister. Al-Bakri noted that the reason for this had to do with the fact that the king could always be sure that the son of his sister was his biological nephew, but his own son might not be if his own wife were unfaithful. This explanation made sense to historians and ethnographers. However, it remained a riddle why kings would follow a matrilineal custom while the rest of society was patrilineal. This inconsistency



has led many, at least since the 1970s, to doubt the veracity of Al-Bakri's claims. Because there are so few sources for the Kingdom of Ghana, we may never know the answer for sure.

Reading Analysis

As you read the short description of Ghana and Soninké customs above, fill out the chart below. On the left-hand column you will find four characteristics of ancient Ghanaian society. On the right-hand column, write down how historians, ethnographers, and anthropologists have determined these characteristics.

| Historical Characteristic | How we Know |
|---|-------------|
| The kingdom grew in wealth due to the gold trade. | |
| The Soninké were a patrilineal society. | |
| The Soninké were a highly stratified and hierarchical society. | |
| The kings of the Kingdom of Ghana may or may not have followed a matrilineal succession practice. | |

