

UNIT 3



The Culture and Kingdoms of West Africa

Chapter 12 Early Societies in West Africa

Chapter 13 Ghana: A West African Trading Empire

Chapter 14 The Influence of Islam on West Africa

Chapter 15 The Cultural Legacy of West Africa



Setting the Stage

The Culture and Kingdoms of West Africa

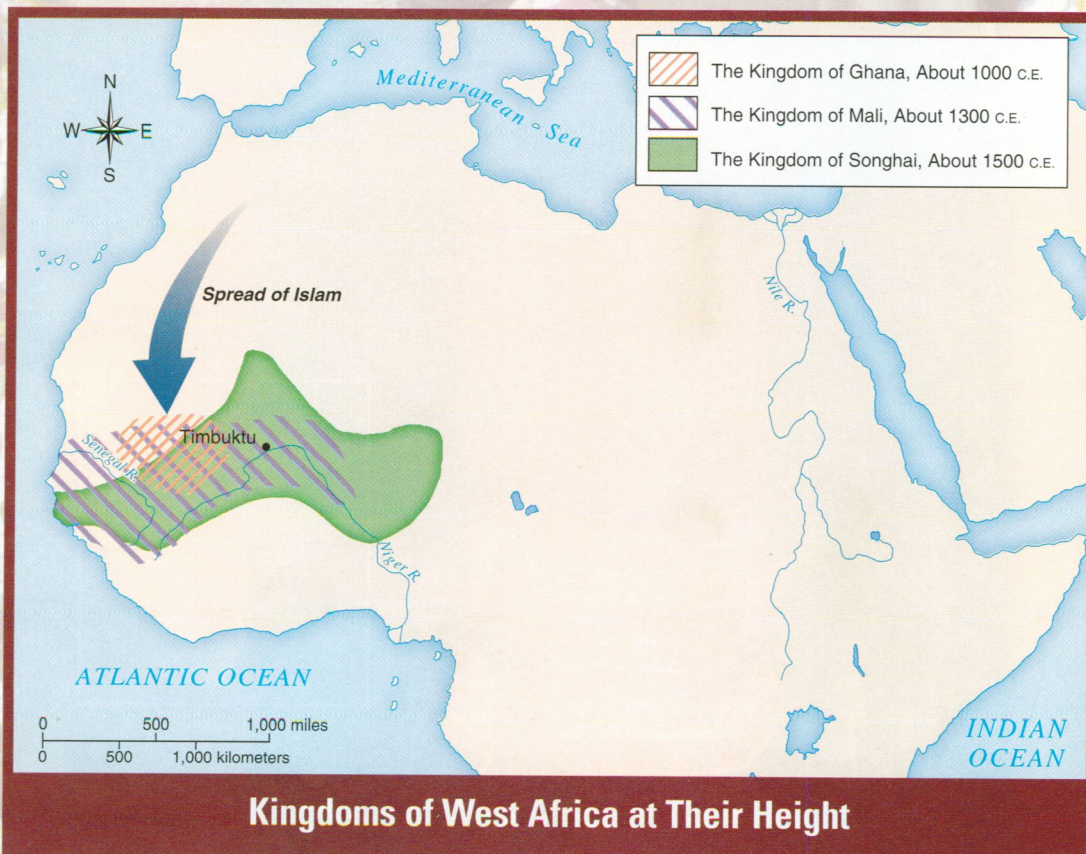
In the last unit, you learned about the rise of Islam. In this unit, you will explore the history and culture of West Africa between about 500 and 1600 c.e.

Africa is south of Europe, between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. To the north is the Mediterranean Sea.

Africa is the second largest continent on Earth, after Asia. It can be divided into four main regions: West Africa, North Africa, Central and South Africa, and East Africa.

Several vegetation zones form belts across Africa (see the second map on the opposite page). Four types of zones are especially important for our study of West Africa because of their effect on life there. Deserts are sandy, hot, and dry. A semidesert is a somewhat less dry zone of grasses and shrubs. In West Africa, this zone is called the Sahel. A savanna consists of grassland with tall grasses and scattered trees. Forest zones have the most abundant vegetation.

In ancient times, farming communities developed in the region south of the Sahara Desert. Rivers such as the Senegal and the Niger helped make the

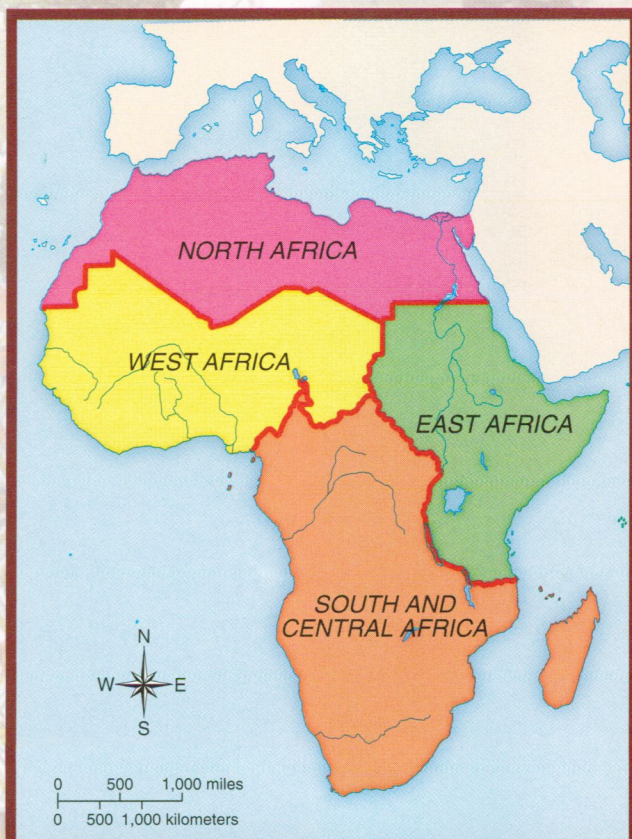


land fertile. The rivers also provided fish and served as trade routes within the region.

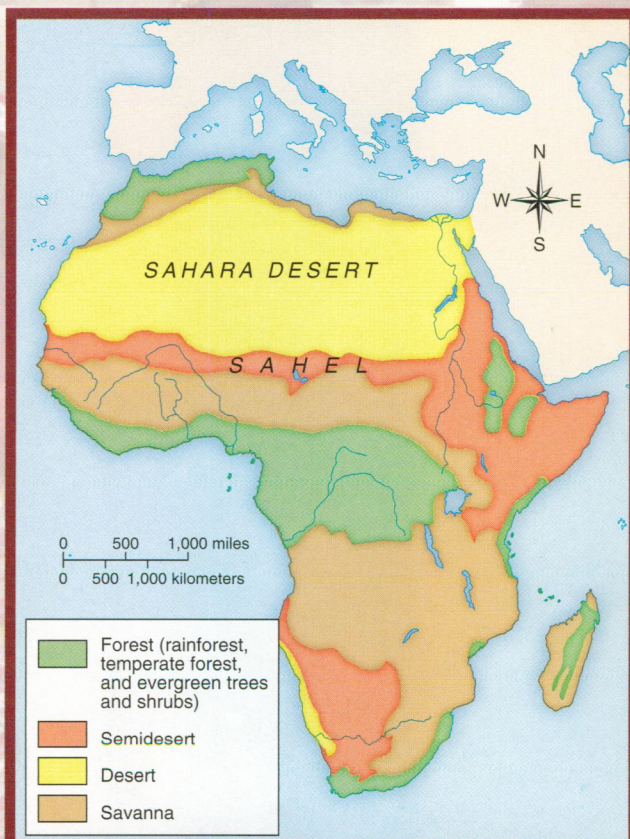
For centuries, West Africa had limited contact with lands to the north because travel across the vast Sahara Desert was very difficult. By the late 700s c.e., however, an increasing number of Arab Muslim traders from North Africa were crossing the Sahara. Trans-Saharan trade played a key role in the growth of the three great medieval kingdoms of West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

Trade brought cultural change as well as goods to West Africa. In the 700s c.e., traders from North Africa brought Islam to the region. Islam had a deep impact on West African culture. The trading city of Timbuktu, on the Niger River, was a vital center of Islamic learning under both Mali and Songhai rule.

In this unit, you'll learn about the kingdoms and culture of West Africa. Let's begin our exploration by taking a closer look at how early societies developed in this region.



Regions of Africa



Vegetation Zones of Africa



Archeological digs provide clues about ancient settlements.

Early Societies in West Africa

12.1 Introduction

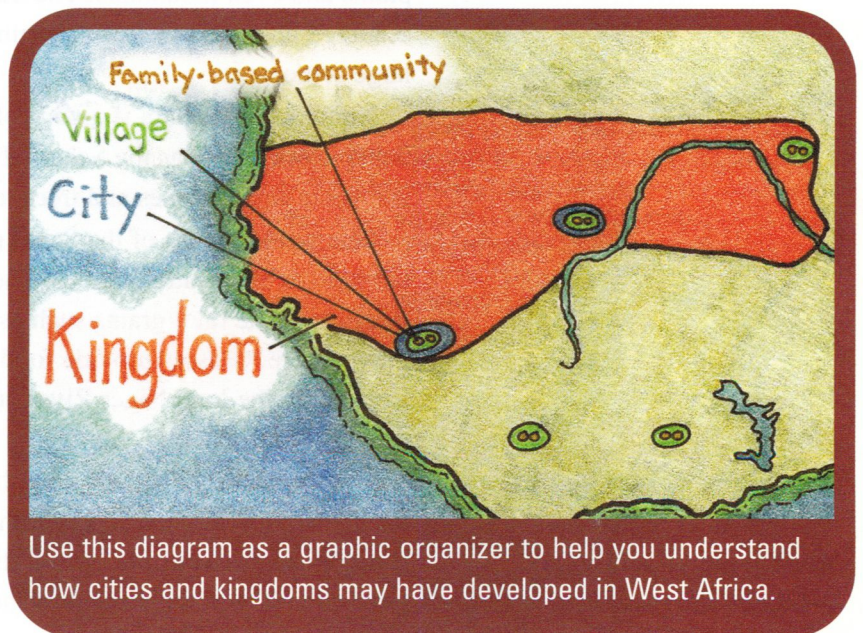
In this unit, you will learn about West African culture between about 500 and 1600 C.E. During this period, three **kingdoms** arose south of the Sahara Desert: Ghana, Songhai, and Mali. In this chapter, you will explore how these kingdoms developed out of early societies in West Africa.

People have lived in West Africa for hundreds of thousands of years. For most of this time, historians do not have written records to study. Muslim scholars first began writing about the kingdom of Ghana in the 800s. By then, Ghana was perhaps 300 years old, and possibly much older. How did the first kingdoms come to be? Why did they develop where they did?

To answer questions like these, historians and archeologists study many kinds of clues. For example, they look closely at geography. Natural features like rivers and vegetation help explain where people chose to settle and what kind of life they created for themselves. Scholars also try to understand evidence from ancient settlements. How were villages and towns laid out? What can this tell us about life there?

Artifacts also provide helpful clues. Iron tools, for example, show that farming methods improved in West Africa. Scholars have worked to understand how more efficient farming affected the growth of towns and cities. Gradually, scholars have pieced together a picture of how societies developed in West Africa.

In this chapter, you will explore current thinking about the origins of West African kingdoms. You will discover how early **family-based communities** developed into **villages** and how some villages grew into **towns** and **cities**. You will see how some cities became great kingdoms.





Even today, people use canoes to travel along the Niger River.

12.2 Geography and Trade

Geography offers many clues about why people settle where they do and how they live. It also helps to explain patterns of trade. As you will see throughout this chapter, trade played a key role in the growth of West African societies. Let's take a look at the geography of West Africa and its influence on trade.

Geography In the north, West Africa begins in the sands of the Sahara Desert. To the west and south it is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, and to the east by the mountains of present-day Cameroon. This region includes the vegetation zones of desert, semidesert, savanna, and forest.

The Sahara Desert spreads across approximately 3,500,000 square miles in North Africa and the northern part of West Africa. Sand dunes cover one quarter of the Sahara, but this desert also has bare, rocky plains and even mountains. The Sahara is very dry except for some scattered oases. As you can imagine, it was not a suitable place for large settlements.

South of the Sahara is a zone of semidesert called the Sahel. The Sahel is not as dry as the Sahara. It has enough water for short grasses and some small bushes and trees to survive.

The southern part of the Sahel merges into the savanna, an area of tall grasses and scattered trees. The savanna has a long rainy season. Because of the rain, grains such as millet, sorghum, and rice can be grown there. Grasses provide food for cattle, camels, goats, and sheep. Rivers like the long Niger River help make nearby land fertile and also provide fish for eating.

The Niger River extends into the forest zone in the southern part of West Africa. This zone is wetter than the savanna. Its northern part is a **woodland forest** of trees and shrubs. Oil palms, yams, and kola trees grow here. The southern part of the zone is lush **rainforest**, where

woodland forest an area of abundant trees and shrubs
rainforest an area of lush vegetation and year-round rainfall

rain falls year-round. In the rainforest, tall trees such as mahogany and teak grow above swamps and lagoons.

Trade The geography of West Africa influenced the patterns of trade that developed there. Different resources are found in each of the vegetation zones. As a result, people living in different zones had to trade to get items they could not provide for themselves. For example, people in the savanna may have traded grains in return for yams or mahogany from the forests.

Several major rivers served as trading routes in West Africa. The Niger is the region's longest river. It became a kind of trading highway. People in ancient times traveled the Niger and other rivers by canoe to trade goods. Some traders also crossed the desert from North Africa, but most early trade was between West African settlements.

12.3 Early Communities and Villages

By about 4000 B.C.E., some people had settled to farm south of the Sahara Desert. The earliest farming communities were made up of **extended families**. An extended family includes close relatives such as grandparents as well as aunts, uncles, and their children.

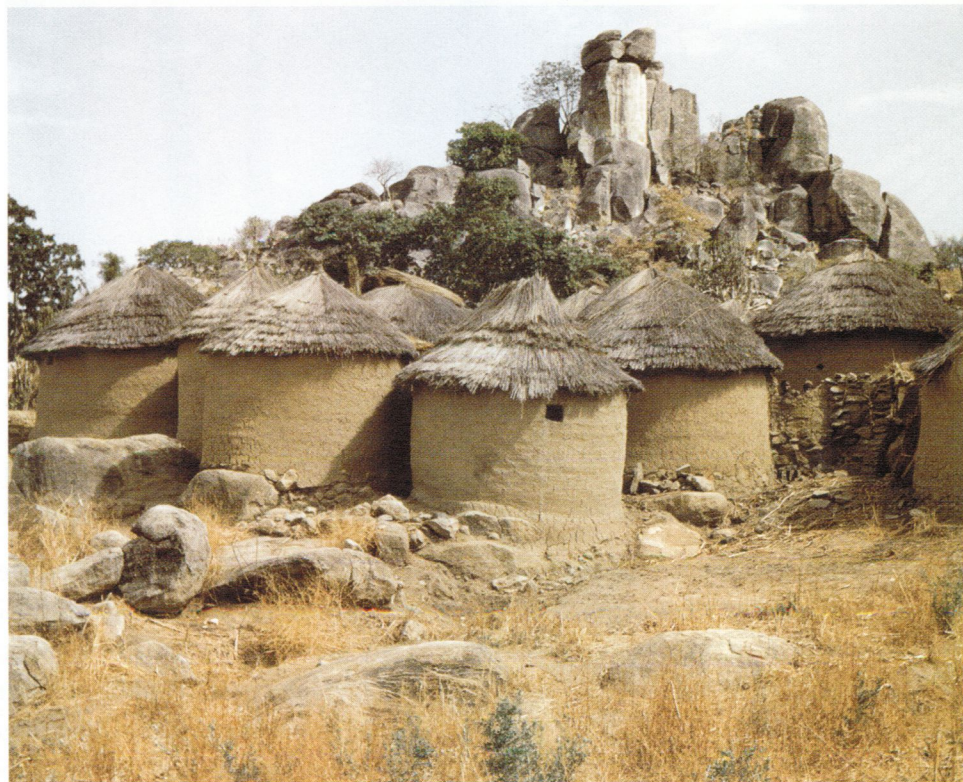
An extended-family community might have had about 15 to 20 members. Each community produced most of the things it needed. Family members worked together to clear the fields, plant seeds, and harvest crops. These small communities traded with one another for additional goods. Very likely, one of the male elders made decisions for the family community.

Over time, family communities joined together to form villages. A village might contain 100 to 200 people. The village leader was probably chosen for his wisdom.

Extended families usually banded together in villages to get needed help. For example, people might need to work together to control a flooding river or to mine for iron or gold. They may also have come together for protection. Archeologists have discovered ruins of high walls and gates at the ancient West African village of Dhar Tichitt. These structures suggest that the villagers united to protect themselves from attacks by outsiders.

extended family an immediate family (parents and their children) plus other close relatives, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins

Early villages might have had homes built close together for protection.



12.4 The Development of Towns and Cities

Some West African villages gradually developed into towns and cities. Ancient cities in West Africa were not as large as modern cities, but some had thousands of residents.

Why did villages grow into cities in West Africa? Two important reasons were the growth of ironworking and the expansion of trade.

Ironworking and Trade The Hittites of present-day Turkey mastered ironworking as long ago as 1500 B.C.E. Gradually, knowledge of ironworking spread. Eventually it reached West Africa, perhaps by way of traders who crossed the Sahara Desert. Some scholars think that ironworking developed independently among people in the northern part of West Africa.

By the 500s B.C.E., a people called the Nok were making iron tools. The Nok lived in what is now central Nigeria. Archeologists have found some of their iron tools and iron-smelting furnaces.

Smelting is the process of heating and melting ore in order to get iron or other metals from it. The Nok used enormous amounts of charcoal to fuel their iron-smelting furnaces. The red-hot iron was then hammered and bent into useful shapes by skilled workers called *blacksmiths*. Nok blacksmiths made axes, hoes, and weapons such as spears.

The craft of ironworking spread rapidly throughout West Africa. The ability to make tools out of iron brought major changes. With iron

tools, farmers could clear land and grow crops more efficiently than with stone tools. The greater abundance of food supported larger villages where more people were free to work at other trades, such as weaving, metalworking, and pottery making.

More and more, villages produced surplus (extra) food and handmade goods. They could then trade their surplus for goods they could not produce themselves.

As goods traveled across West Africa, villages located along rivers or other easily traveled

routes became trading sites. Villages that controlled trade routes became market centers and grew richer by charging for trading activity. They drew many people to work at new jobs, such as supervising trade and helping construct public buildings. Some of the villages grew into sizable towns and cities. Other large settlements grew up around natural resources, such as iron ore and good farmland.



Iron tools made farming more efficient. This allowed people to devote more time to weaving and other trades.

The Ancient City of Jenne-jeno

In 1977, archeologists began **excavating** the ancient West African city of Jenne-jeno. Built in the third century B.C.E., Jenne-jeno existed for more than 1,600 years. Before it was rediscovered, historians thought that cities did not exist in West Africa until outsiders arrived and helped local people build them. The discovery of Jenne-jeno proved this theory wrong.

Jenne-jeno was built where the Niger River meets the Bani River. This was an ideal location for farming, fishing, and trade. The people of Jenne-jeno traded their surplus goods—such as catfish, fish oil, onions, and rice—for salt, iron ore, copper, and gold. The iron ore came from 50 miles away and the copper from 600 miles away.

Jenne-jeno grew into a busy city of about 20,000 people. It was surrounded by a circular wall 10 feet wide and 13 feet high. The wall may have been built to give the city more status and to make it easier to control the comings and goings of traders.

The people of Jenne-jeno lived in circular houses. At first the houses were made from bent poles and woven mats. Later they were built from mud blocks.

The city's people worked at many crafts. Besides farmers and fishermen, there were potters, metalsmiths, weavers, leatherworkers, bead makers, and ivory carvers.

The most respected people in Jenne-jeno were the blacksmiths. The people of West Africa prized iron even more than gold. They were amazed by the blacksmiths' ability to make useful tools from iron. People thought the blacksmiths had supernatural (magical or godlike) powers. For this reason, they gave blacksmiths many responsibilities. Blacksmiths acted as political leaders, judges, and doctors. Some were charged with predicting the future.

In recent years, scientists have studied the sites of other ancient cities in West Africa. They have found evidence of trade, craftsmanship, and wealth.



The ancient city of Jenne-jeno was built on this floodplain on the Niger River, less than two miles from the modern city of Jenne.

excavate in archeology, to carefully dig out an ancient site

tribute a payment made by one ruler or country to another for protection or as a sign of submission

12.5 The Rise of Kingdoms and Empires

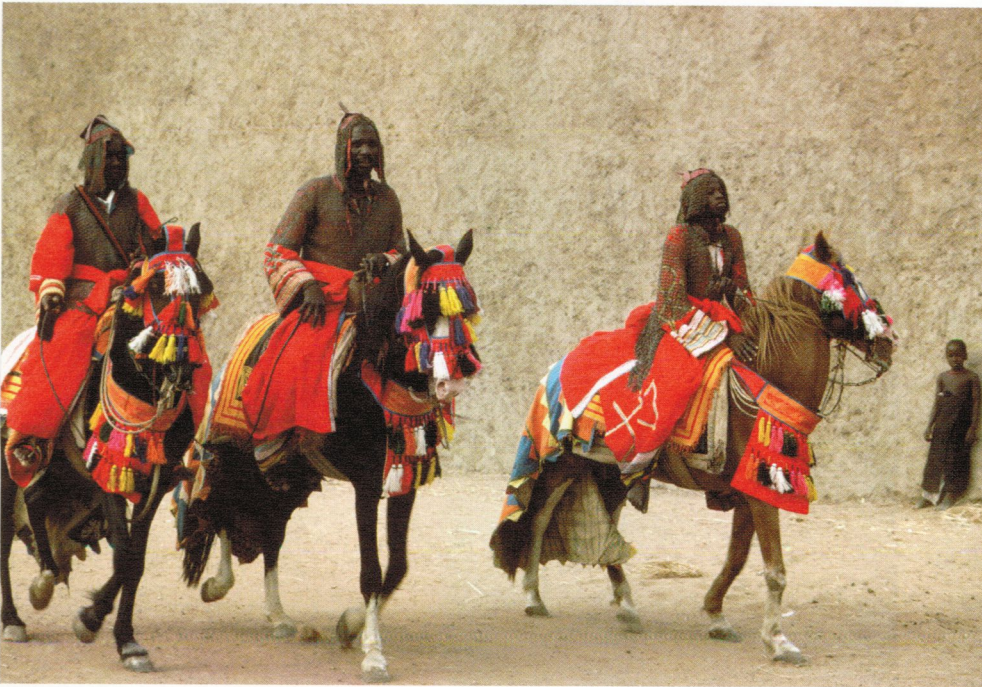
Trade was a major factor in the rise of kingdoms in West Africa. Ghana, Mali, and Songhai were all trading powers that ruled over large areas. Historians often refer to them as empires as well as kingdoms.

How did the first kingdoms develop? The rulers of some trading cities in West Africa became wealthy by collecting taxes from the goods that were bought and sold. With their wealth, they could afford to raise large armies. These armies could conquer other trading areas nearby. Then the ruler could take over the trade of those areas and become even wealthier.

Rulers also collected **tribute** from the people they conquered. The payment of tribute was a sign that the ruler accepted the king's authority. Tribute could also pay for protection from outside attackers.

West African kings were both the political and the religious leaders of their kingdoms. They were believed to have special powers given to them by the gods. They performed religious ceremonies to please the gods.

As a king conquered more territory, the kingdom grew into an empire. Sometimes a

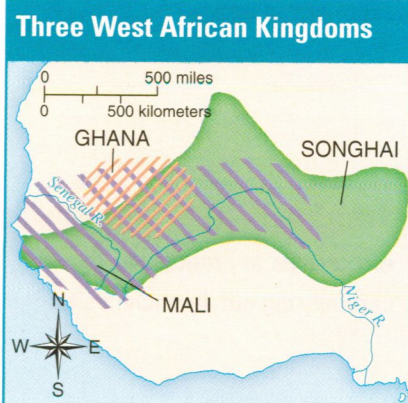


These modern horsemen from West Africa are a reminder of the armies that rulers were able to raise with the wealth they received from trade.

king sent a governor to rule a conquered area. Sometimes he allowed conquered people to rule themselves.

Becoming part of a kingdom or an empire had disadvantages. One was the obligation to pay tribute. Another was that men had to serve in the king's army. But there were advantages as well. Kings provided protection for the conquered territory. Armies made sure trade routes were safe, and they kept out raiders and foreign armies. Wars between small cities ended. Kings collected luxury goods from their subjects and passed them out fairly throughout the kingdom. They also gave expensive presents to their governors.

The great kingdoms of West Africa did not rely on only local trade. By the time Ghana became an important power, trans-Saharan trade was bringing new wealth to West Africa. Control of trade, particularly in West African gold, was also a key to the power of Mali. Songhai, too, relied on trade with distant lands. You'll learn more about the importance of trans-Saharan trade in the next chapter.



12.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how kingdoms and empires grew out of early societies in West Africa. Geography was a major factor in the development of these societies. Settled communities grew up below the Sahara Desert, where the land permitted farming. Geography also influenced trading patterns. Communities traded with one another for items they could not produce locally. Rivers such as the Niger served as trade routes.

The earliest societies in West Africa were family-based communities. Some of these communities joined together to form villages. Banding together in villages allowed people to take advantage of natural resources and protect themselves from attack.

Iron making and trade helped some villages grow into sizable towns and cities. Iron tools allowed farmers grow food more efficiently. As a result, more people could engage in other crafts. Villages traded with one another for their surplus goods. Some villages became important trading sites and grew into cities. Other large settlements developed around farmland or other natural resources.

Trade brought some cities great wealth. The wealthiest cities conquered neighboring areas, leading to the rise of kingdoms and empires. Rulers gained even more wealth through tribute as well as control of trade. In the next chapter, you will learn more about the importance of trade as you study the ancient kingdom of Ghana.

Ancient kingdoms developed because they controlled trading centers. This modern trading center of Mopti is on the Niger River.

