

Voices from the Past - III

I, Askia Muhammad, have fallen far in my lifetime. Once king of Songhai, the largest empire in our continent's history, today I am a broken man banished to an island in the Niger River. I wish to tell my story that all may know of our empire and my work to make it great.

Though my people have been in this world for hundreds of years, our lands were small until our warrior king, Sonni Ali. After the death of Mali's Mansa Musa in 1337, weaker leaders followed and Sonni Ali was able to conquer most of Mali's land in the late 1400's. I was fortunate to serve as a governor and general for Sonni Ali and highly respected him. His use of horses and ships in warfare was brilliant! Under his leadership Timbuktu and Jenne became our most important trading cities and he also created a strong system of government and law.

When Sonni Ali died in 1492, his son became the new ruler. I could see that the young man was a poor ruler and would harm our people, so I seized control from him. I am, as are many nobles and royalty, a Muslim, and worked hard to bring Islam to my people. Our system of law was run according to Muslim principles. I appointed Muslims to government positions and I led a tremendous Hajj to Makkah.

Despite my efforts I must admit that I failed to make Songhai a completely Islamic kingdom. Though Islam has grown in importance in our cities, most Songhai continue to follow the traditional tribal religion. However I did have other successes for which I am proud. First I was able to organize and strengthen the government so that we could control our large empire. I established a system of weights and measures for use by all people in our lands. The system of law that I put into place has brought order and peace to our people. Our cities have become great centers of culture and learning, attracting Muslim scholars from faraway lands. I have heard from visitors that Songhai is spoken of as the greatest empire in all of Africa and that I was known in foreign lands as a great statesman.

Unfortunately, though, I did not succeed in raising caring and respectful children. In 1528 my three sons overthrew me and took control of the government. I was banished from the land and taken to live on this island with only my guards for company. It is certainly lonely and frustrating for me, but I have lived a good life and have much to be thankful for. I pray that our empire will maintain its power and its position in world trade and culture.