RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND THE GHANA EMPIRE (ca. 350-1250):

The Key to Ghana’s Success

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This paper is dedicated to those that have come before me, from the griots, or bards, of West Africa to the Arab geographers of the era, to the synthesizers past and present. This is for the historians, new and old.



“Ghana consists of two towns situated in a plain,”[[1]](#footnote-1) wrote Al-Bakri, an Andalusian geographer and the most thorough primary source on the Ghana Empire, in 1067. Yet, Ibn Hawqal, a late 10th century visitor of the city of Awdaghost, a commercial partner to Ghana, called the king of Ghana “the richest [king] in the world.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Ghana only grew between the time these two men wrote, so how can both these statements be accounted for? How did “two towns situated in a plain” create and house the richest man on Earth? For one, Ghana had perfect geography: it is located on the Sahel, which literally means “shore.” The sea was the Sahara, and Ghana was its port city. Farther away from this sea, in this case, farther south of the Sahara, lay some of the most incredible gold deposits in the world, so much so that the region is still to this day called the “Gold Coast.” Being in between large deposits of the most valuable natural resource at the time and a vast ocean-like desert was a dream come true, but such brilliant location could not be wasted, and the Soninke, the predominant and ruling ethnic group in Ghana, would do no such thing. The Ghana Empire flourished because of its deliberate economic practices and its complete religious tolerance. The former is true of almost all empires, especially trade-focused empires and especially those in the Western Sudan, but the latter is the key to understanding the Empire of Ghana’s success. While the deliberate economic practices needed to be implemented, without religious freedom, it all would’ve been impossible in that time, in that place.

**Origins**

The Empire of Ghana, which shared no land with the modern country of Ghana, was located in the Sahel, which itself is in the Western portion of the region known as Sudan. The Soninke, who would come to rule the Ghana Empire during its heyday, are descended from the Gangara people, a Neolithic group that began to settle the oases of the Sahara,[[3]](#footnote-3) as the Sahara dried from its lush and humid state before the 4th millennium BCE to the vast desert known today. This process probably did not completely finish until the early first millennium CE. These proto-Soninke were forced out of the Sahara by a group of nomads from North Africa who would eventually become the Berbers, the main ethnicity in the Sahara during the time of the Ghana Empire. The word Sarakolle, meaning “red white people” is often applied as a synonym to Soninke, which suggests there might have been interbreeding during these migrations, as the Soninke are a black ethnicity, and the only way they would have ever been white would have been through interbreeding with the white Berbers.[[4]](#footnote-4) In addition to the completion of the drying of the Sahara, the immediate context for the rise of Ghana around the 4th century CE included two other major developments crucial to Ghana’s rise: the Iron Age and the introduction of camels into West Africa. The iron, which probably arrived in West Africa via Kushan ambassadors,[[5]](#footnote-5) and the Soninke’s deftness at using it were major keys to Ghana’s political and economic domination.[[6]](#footnote-6) Iron-tipped farming equipment led to massive gains in agricultural surpluses, which are a necessary ingredient for any empire. In addition, iron weapons gave the Soninke complete military supremacy over their neighbors, who often used bone and wood for weapons.[[7]](#footnote-7) The camels were also integral to the empire’s development, as trans-Saharan trade was insignificant prior to their introduction,[[8]](#footnote-8) but would balloon soon after. The camels, with their ability to go days and weeks without water due to their ability to store up 25 gallons of water at a time,[[9]](#footnote-9) became the main beast of burden in the Sahara. Besides their water storage, camels are especially adapted to the desert because of their closeable nostrils, hairy ears, and two-rowed eyelashes, which keep sand out of their nose, ears, and eyes, respectively during the journey.[[10]](#footnote-10) Caravanserai, small inns along the major Saharan trade routes, even had specialized care for camels and plenty of camel food.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As the Sahara continued to dry, people continued to move out of it, and many historians believe the amalgamation of these people forced out by the “Big Dry” of 300 BCE-300CE[[12]](#footnote-12) was a major cause of the empire. Other historians have a more combative view of this amalgamation, that as Berber nomads were forced out of the Sahara, they began raiding the Sudan, which was *forced* to organize to defend itself. It is also possible the potential interbreeding between Berber and Soninke occurred during this interaction in the sub-Saharan, and not during their previous interaction in the Sahara.

These were important shifts in West Africa that led to Ghana’s rise, but specific *people* also caused the rise of Ghana. Exactly which people founded Ghana is up for debate: Despite the undeniable fact that black Soninke controlled Ghana at its peak[[13]](#footnote-13) in circa 900-1076, many historians have theorized the so-called “Hamitic Hypothesis,” which states that white people founded the Ghana Empire. It has even been suggested that Ghana was founded by aliens.[[14]](#footnote-14) The last theory can probably be chalked up to the racist notion that black people could not possibly form a civilization independently, and one would assume so to can the Hamitic Hypothesis, but the reason why that is not merely a racist and tinfoil-hat theory is because the Soninke themselves believe it,[[15]](#footnote-15) or at least believe that the empire wasn’t started by a black man.[[16]](#footnote-16) The Soninke griots, their oral historians and bards, instead preach that Dinga, the founder of Ghana, was a faraway stranger to sub-Saharan Africa,[[17]](#footnote-17) potentially from as far away as India.[[18]](#footnote-18) The griots teach that the riches of Ghana come from a deal struck between the son of Dinga and a well-residing snake named Bida. The deal was actually a compromise between the bloodthirstiness of Bida and the wishes of the people that involved the annual sacrifice of one filly[[19]](#footnote-19) and the most beautiful girl in the kingdom in exchange for gold rain. Despite the griots’ sermon though, the Hamitic Hypothesis is not usually believed to be correct, largely due to the lack of hard evidence for it.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Ghana was formed by a combination of factors, which on the surface, are interesting, but do not in any significant way support the thesis of this paper. However, looking deeper, these stories, whether environmental, anthropological, orally passed down or just plain made-up, all involve outsiders. From the Hamitic Hypothesis to the foreign arrival of camels and iron to the possible interbreeding of Berbers with Soninke, Ghana’s origins are a testament to fusion, not fission. The value placed on fusion is intrinsically Ghanaian. Ghana would not have been possible without Muslims *and* pagans, Berbers *and* Soninke.

**The Economy**

The economy of Ghana was huge and built upon longitudinal trade, from north to south and back. This trade was so big that Ibn Hawqal, a 10th century visitor of the trading city of Sijilmasa, another commercial partner of Ghana, once saw a check written for 42,000 dinars.[[21]](#footnote-21) Considering one dinar to be four and a half grams of gold, that amount of gold today would be worth around 7.7 million US dollars. Though the check may have merely been a notation of debt or a bill,[[22]](#footnote-22) the size of the check speaks volumes to the amount of gold being traded across the Sahara. Since roughly 80% of the population lived on farms,[[23]](#footnote-23) numerous foods were traded, including at least millet, sorghum, ground nuts, cowpeas, rice, cotton, okra, watermelon, kola nuts, sesame seeds, butternut,[[24]](#footnote-24) and fish,[[25]](#footnote-25) but the main trade that occurred was for salt and gold. In the harshly hot and difficult climate of the sub-Saharan savannah, the body loses salt through sweat rapidly. Salt, despite its need, is difficult to find south of the Sahara but, in the Sahara lay extremely rich rock salt deposits, highlighted in Ghana’s era by the magnificent salt city of Taghaza, where it was rumored all the buildings were built of the mineral itself due to its abundance.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The salt mines of the Sahara, however, seem like mere economic pawns to the queen that was sub-Saharan gold. The western Sudan is so rich in gold that it was the Eastern Hemisphere’s chief supplier from the 700s to the colonization of the Americas in the 1500s.[[27]](#footnote-27) North Africa needed gold almost as desperately as the Sudanese needed salt, since it was the basis of currency for all the Arabic empires of Ghana’s era. Ghana’s currency, as not to compete, was dependent on what was valuable in the area, whether it was salt, copper, glass, cloth or any other good.[[28]](#footnote-28) Perfectly complementing the Arabic empires’ needs for gold was Ghana’s surplus in it, so great that they often dressed in gold or even dressed their dogs in it.[[29]](#footnote-29) In short, Ghana had access to gold, but needed salt, while the Arabic empires had access to salt, but needed gold. The only thing missing from this relationship was a facilitator, which Ghana filled. But to fill the needs of two incredibly distinct and different people with a history of conflict, Ghana had to remain neutral, especially when these two sides would be further separated by religion.

The dar-al-Islam, or Islamic World, was very stable at the turn of the first millennium AD, sometimes referred to as the Pax Islamica. Nonetheless, this was mostly stability in the type of government in the dar-al-Islam, not the specific rulers or names of the empires, which changed all the time to reflect infighting, coups, and religious disagreements. This distinction was important for Ghana because whenever a new Arabic Empire would take over, they wanted new coinage, which required more gold. For example, the Aghlabids ruled North Africa during the 9th century, as a tributary of the Abbasids, who controlled a vast empire stretching from Spain across all of North Africa and Arabia. When the Fatimids conquered the Aghlabids in North Africa in the early 10th century, they needed a large gold supply for their expansion.[[30]](#footnote-30) In addition, the Fatimid conquest split the Abbasids into one empire in Spain and one empire in Arabia and cut these two sides of the same empire off from each other, meaning the Spanish former Abbasids needed a gold supply of their own as well.[[31]](#footnote-31) The most important similarity between all of these empires was that the ruling religion of Islam. The merchants of Ghana who had bought gold from the south were selling to Muslims and possibly even Muslim governments in empires that, at the very least had jizya, or head taxes, for all non-Muslims. The invasive jizya helps explain the spread of Islam to the merchant class, but it also further justifies the importance of religious freedom in Ghana. If the merchants were not free to convert to Islam for its usefulness in trade, the empire would have lost a gargantuan part of their economy.

Islam’s usefulness was equaled by the traditional African spirit-worshipping religion’s usefulness. One reason why the kings of Ghana did not convert to Islam until around the 12th or the 13th century was because they operated with what is basically the West African equivalent to the Mandate of Heaven, meaning their traditional religion’s doctrine justified their power and rule.[[32]](#footnote-32) Additionally, the kings had been buried the same way for centuries, with slave, servant and sometimes wife[[33]](#footnote-33) sacrifices in a sacred grove.[[34]](#footnote-34) The gold miners just south of Ghana were also fiercely traditionalist, so much so that when forced to convert under the larger and more oppressive Mali Empire, they simply refused to mine.[[35]](#footnote-35) Furthermore, the gold miners of the south hid the gold mines’ actual locations and never revealed them, even under duress.[[36]](#footnote-36) The key to this secrecy existed in the trading method: dumb bartering. A merchant offering mostly goods (nonmetals) would place them all down in an open space. He would then leave and while he was gone, a gold miner would place down an amount of gold dust he deemed appropriate to pay for the goods. If the merchant was satisfied, he would take the gold dust. If unsatisfied, he wouldn’t. He could change how much good he put down or not, but the conditions are clear and merchant-friendly: the transaction was complete when the merchant took the gold. Only then was the miner free to take the goods. The miners’ emphasis on secrecy meant that not only was it not advantageous to convert them, but they had to be kept happy, not just pacified, since gold mining and therefore most trade was impossible without them. Trade with the north was only possible if the merchants could convert to Islam; trade with the south was only possible if the gold miners could stay secretive, religious traditionalists. This dichotomy meant the middleman, the Ghana Empire, had to stay neutral, and their neutrality was their recipe for success.

The gold dust was the key export of Ghana, but getting into Ghana to obtain it, and getting out of Ghana to sell it to a mint (probably located in Sijilmasa) was no easy task. You had to cross the Sahara, which was nearly impossible without a camel caravan. However, a camel caravan was not as simple as one merchant and a camel. A typical caravan in Ghana’s era would have also had its own scholars, slaves, poets, musicians, ambassadors, and bodyguards.[[37]](#footnote-37) The bodyguards were important because while Ghana did do its best to protect merchants, having a standing army whose peacetime duty was to escort and protect caravans[[38]](#footnote-38) and a police-like special force to keep everyday peace,[[39]](#footnote-39) it only did so within a small reach of the kingdom. These forces did not spend resources patrolling the Sahara, even just the most popular trade routes. To make matters worse, the caravan journeys were nocturnal as to avoid traveling during the hottest parts of the day, with resting occurring only at caravanserai and stopping only for prayer breaks.[[40]](#footnote-40)

**The Wealth of the State**

The economy was booming, but an economy and a government’s money supply were not, and are not, the same thing. The government of Ghana was nonexploitative, unoppressive,[[41]](#footnote-41) and for the most part unrestrictive. That being said, the government had to extract wealth somehow, and it is evident they extracted enough to be phenomenally rich. Their main method of this was through taxation. Taxation was not on income, though, but rather, on all commerce. This was simply not possible to do using a sales tax approach, as it would have required government officials present for every market interaction in the entire empire. Instead, the government established tariffs on all goods entering and exiting the country. The rates were as follows: 1 dinar for every donkey load of salt entering the empire, 2 dinars for every donkey load leaving the empire, 5 dinars for copper entering and leaving, and 10 dinars for merchandise (finished goods).[[42]](#footnote-42) The difference in salt tariff as an import and as an export was a deliberate mode of getting salt to stay in Ghana, since it was physiologically required for survival, unlike most of the other goods being traded. Taxes were used for the most part to secure the flow of trade by building roads and guarding traders.[[43]](#footnote-43) Maintaining the flow of trade was especially important so that they could maintain their revenue, especially considering the government did no trade itself, only levying tariffs on trade that happens within the empire.[[44]](#footnote-44) Ghana, because it did no trade of its own, needed its merchants to serve as successful facilitators between north and south, Muslim and traditionalist. The coexistence of the two groups was integral to the empire’s wealth, and an alienation of one of the groups would be devastating.

Two large, but smaller sources of government wealth were tribute from conquered cities and the spoils of war. Since there were high amounts of local autonomy, partly for the religious differences through the empire, extracting tribute from chiefs was challenging, so Ghana’s government took the sons of vassal kings hostage to assist them in this process. [[45]](#footnote-45)

The wealth of the kingdom also came from another source, this one unique to Ghana. Ghana had a monopoly on all gold nuggets over a certain weight, in its region, which aided its growth in many ways. For one, the gold nuggets had monetary value, which could probably be broken down in emergencies. Second, the gold nuggets gave off an air of mystery[[46]](#footnote-46) and power to the throne that further allowed for the subduing of the people. Third, keeping the gold nuggets off the market significantly raised the price of gold, since the nuggets would take away a lot of the scarcity that the gold market depended on. Especially in an essentially capitalist market, the kings of Ghana were hyper-aware that they had to keep economic forces at bay in the preservation of their empire’s most important resource. Finally, the restriction of gold trade to gold dust prevented the Arabs’ from fully understanding the resource at all. Notably, some Arabs believed gold either grew from the ground like a carrot or that the earth in Ghana was actually made of gold and could only be extracted through building small fires to melt it.[[47]](#footnote-47) This lack of understanding of the mineral probably discouraged the Arab world from attempting to conquer Ghana, as conquering a place one does not understand how to use would have been pointless. Ghana’s government needed the traditionalist pagan secrecy and the Arab splendor and glory to effectively generate wealth, since tariffs were the main source of it. The Ghana Empire could not be one or the other, just Berber or Soninke or just Muslim or pagan. It had to be both, in all ways. Moreover, Ghana also needed cooperation within the government from Muslims and pagans alike, which would only be possible if the government cooperated with them.

**The Capital and the Government It Housed**

The place to which Al-Bakri was referring in the opening paragraph, when he said, “Ghana consists of two towns situated in a plain” was probably not the whole of the empire, but rather its capital, likely located at Koumbi-Saleh. It is in this capital that Ghana’s religious freedom shined. Even as early as 1000 CE, long before the empire’s kings converted, and even longer before all its people did, the job of interpreter was already being filled by a Muslim.[[48]](#footnote-48) Later on, the job of treasurer, was also given routinely to Muslims.[[49]](#footnote-49) Muslims were allowed to be ministers in the government, even while the kings were still pagan.[[50]](#footnote-50) It is important to remember the Soninke had their own religion, with a superior god, lesser deities, and a great respect for the dead.[[51]](#footnote-51) In a land where kings were still buried with several willing servants, an annual human sacrifice to a snake who lives in a well took place, and where court decisions were sometimes decided by giving the defendant water with some wood in it and seeing if they vomited[[52]](#footnote-52); in this land, Muslims, worshippers of a single god and its single prophet, not only coexisted, but *cooperated* in government. It is possible there were at least someinternal squabbles in the government at the time of this religious coexistence, but there is no evidence of any. This cooperation would have been impossible had the pagan kings simply *employed* Muslims and made no accommodations, but they did make many accommodations and exceptions. For example, there was a mosque for visiting Muslim diplomats in the king’s town,[[53]](#footnote-53) which was otherwise entirely populated with pagans other than the Muslim bureaucrats. In addition, ancient Ghanaian rules about the king’s servicemen prostrating themselves upon the king and putting dirt on their heads did not apply to Muslims who felt uncomfortable prostrating, and were instead allowed to simply clap for the king’s arrival.[[54]](#footnote-54) The king had other ways of demonstrating his power and superiority, notably that he and his family were the only ones allowed to wear sewn clothes, while others wore cotton silk, or brocade,[[55]](#footnote-55) but his ability to concede his greeting in the court was no small sign of solidarity with his several Muslim subjects and bureaucrats.

Zooming out from the castle, the city of Koumbi-Saleh was actually not one at all, but rather two cities, 6 miles apart, one for the pagans, including the king, and one for the Muslims, most of whom were merchants.[[56]](#footnote-56) The idea of segregation by religion may make many Westerners shudder with memories of Jim Crow, but there was a major difference in Ghana: it was preferred by both groups.[[57]](#footnote-57) In some relatively uncontacted, undeveloped, and unwesternized parts of West Africa today such as Northern Nigeria or Northern Ghana, people still live in such religious segregation.[[58]](#footnote-58) The Muslim town was large and had 12 mosques,[[59]](#footnote-59) built for the sole purpose of encouraging and pleasing the Muslim people in it. To counter the Muslim’s town’s 12 mosques, the pagan town had tombs, idols, and its own set of local pagan priests.[[60]](#footnote-60) The message was clear from the government: not only did citizens not have to be of a certain faith, they did not even have to interact with the other faith if not so inclined. Furthermore, the government ensured and protected one’s right to a spiritual life, no matter the religion one subscribed to, with religious buildings and monuments of all types scattered around the city.[[61]](#footnote-61)

The government’s equal recognition and synthesis of Muslim and pagan beliefs and ideals, which often meant Berber and Soninke ones, even applied to succession. The king at the time of Al-Bakri had an heir who was the son of his sister, [[62]](#footnote-62) suggesting a matrilineal line of succession, and the king at the time was a maternal nephew of the previous king himself. However, the Soninke, and all their Mande-speaking cousins, are entirely patrilineal,[[63]](#footnote-63) which means that the Berber tradition of matrilineal succession[[64]](#footnote-64) must have been temporarily adopted by the Soninke. But, we do not know the specific circumstances of these kings: it is possible these kings had no male heirs, or that their nephews were simply the most impressive of eligible rulers. It is not known the circumstances that led to the selection of the nephews Al-Bakri refers to, so it is still unclear[[65]](#footnote-65) whether their matrilineal ascensions to power were the norm or outliers. What is clear though is that the Berber tradition of matrilineal success was used by the Soninke, which again points to the importance of cross-racial and cross-cultural cooperation in Ghana that simply would not have been possible without such religious freedom laws to protect it after the spreading of Islam to West Africa in the 9th century[[66]](#footnote-66).

Ghana had to protect itself and its traders, and push onwards to fetch the tribute they so desired, and for this they used a standing army complete with special forces, acting essentially as police, and a secret service, in addition to their reserve army in time of war, made up of every able-bodied man, who was routinely trained for preparedness.[[67]](#footnote-67) Ghana was surprisingly formidable at war, which can be attributed to two things, the first of which was size: Ghana was the biggest civilization in the region at the time, and according to Al-Bakri, they were capable of raising an army of 200,000 men, including 40,000 archers.[[68]](#footnote-68) The second reason for their military domination was their probable cohesion. Upsets in war can occur, but if there is a giant army of soldiers that trust each other, regardless of what the other looks like or believes in, losing is less likely. The government bred this trust through constant acceptance of Muslims and pagans, Berbers and Soninke alike, in bureaucracy, in Koumbi-Saleh’s voluntary division, in their lack of a religious head-tax, and in so many other ways.

**A Moral Contradiction**

Thus far, this essay has painted Ghana as a religiously free, nondiscriminatory civilization, which is accurate. However, in choosing to focus on these more wholesome characteristics of Ghana, this paper runs the risk of misconstruing Ghana not just as religiously free, or nondiscriminatory, but as moral, which is in no way intended. Before launching into a description of the fall of Ghana and how it proved the initial thesis, it is important we take a detour into an amoral characteristic of Ghana that we have previously ignored: slavery.

Proponents of slavery during the Americas’ indulgence of it in the 1500s-1800s would have said that there was always slavery in Africa, and therefore slavery in the Americas was morally sound. This argument is a flawed one, as the two types of slavery differ in many ways, but the evidence for it is correct: there was slavery in Africa, long before the discovery of the Americas. Gold wasn’t the only commodity the Arabic empires were after, and the Ghanaians had no particular moral qualms with selling their fellow Africans to slavery. The aforementioned city of Taghaza, supposedly made entirely of salt, had essentially no freemen in it, instead just a city of slave salt miners, living off dates, millet and camel meat in the middle of the most unlivable place on Earth, the Sahara.[[69]](#footnote-69) In addition to the Sahara being the site of slave communities like Taghaza, the Sahara also transported slaves, often to their Arabian or Middle-Eastern destinations, but also to their deaths. Trans-Sahara slave trade had an average slave mortality of about 20%,[[70]](#footnote-70) roughly equivalent or even higher than the Atlantic Middle Passage. These slaves were usually captives of war, but a few may have even been raided. [[71]](#footnote-71)

Despite the obvious moral outrage that is slavery at anytime, anywhere, the West African slave trade that Ghana participated in was different from the trans-Atlantic slave trade that would eventually develop. For instance, once the slaves reached North Africa, it would not have been uncommon for them to work for the governments of North Africa, as either bodyguards or mercenaries,[[72]](#footnote-72) which was a very different fate than most slaves in the Americas reached. There was also more social mobility for slaves in Africa than in the later trade, with slaves in Africa during this era becoming supervisors, officials, commanders, or even dignitaries in many of the pre-colonial African civilizations.[[73]](#footnote-73) The most significant difference between the two slaveries was scope. Assuming even high[[74]](#footnote-74) estimates of around 8,700 slaves a year transported in West Africa between 900-1100,[[75]](#footnote-75) the West African slave trade that Ghana participated in pales in comparison to the trans-Atlantic slave trade of the 16th century to the 19th century, which averaged upwards of 30,000 to 40,000 slaves a year. Furthermore, the number of slave raids as opposed to slaves acquired through natural wars for territory or tribute went up substantially, when the trans-Atlantic slave trade became popular.[[76]](#footnote-76)

This morally disgusting practice stands in stark contrast to the cooperation previously described, but it is noteworthy that these were not mutually exclusive. It must be recognized that even a society like Ghana, that seemed ahead of its time in many ways, was still very much a pre-modern empire with very pre-modern morals. It is also important that this paper’s argument be specified in its attempt not to define the Ghanaians as a morally superior empire, but rather as a nondiscriminatory empire that, for all intents and purposes, ignored the color of one’s skin or the beliefs in their heart.

**The Fall**

The Ghana Empire was conquered in the 13th century by the Mali Empire, but it had been significantly weakened prior to their eventual conquest. The most important of these declining events was the 1076 conquering of Ghana by the Almoravids. While the extent to which this was a true conquering and not a military allegiance is somewhat up for debate,[[77]](#footnote-77) an overwhelming number of sources, while they do often cite each other, point to an actual subjugation and conquest of Ghana at the hands of the Almoravids. The Almoravids were a confederation of previously conflicting Berber clans[[78]](#footnote-78) that originally lived in the Sahara, but conquered much of modern-day Spain and Morocco, and much of the then-Ghana Empire. Notwithstanding the obvious role the Berbers had to play in their own organization and conquest of Ghana, the Ghana Empire was at least partially at fault for its destruction at the hands of the Almoravids. First, the lack of Muslim purity in the Ghana Empire was a reason for the Berber anger, who had at this point transitioned from being Muslim for its trading benefits and racial unity to being true believers in forced conversion and jihad. Second, the Ghana Empire arguably started this particular iteration of Berber-Soninke war by conquering Awdaghost in 1055,[[79]](#footnote-79) one of the most important Berber cities and a frequent trading partner of Ghana’s. The provocation that was the seizure of Awdaghost was probably the more immediate of the reasons, since the Almoravids had previously been content with trading with non-Muslims, as long as the money generated was theirs, and not seized as tribute to pay for the new Soninke rulers of their Saharan homeland. Nonetheless, the former reason, the religious impurity of Ghana, would be the more historically important reason. The Almoravids, now ruling over a vast class of non-Muslims sought to turn the Western Sudan into a completely and purely Muslim region.

They partially succeeded in their move to convert the remaining Soninke pagans,[[80]](#footnote-80) at least temporarily, but their actual land grab was a huge failure. By 1087, only 11 years after their capture of Koumbi-Saleh, the capital of Ghana, the Soninke regained the empire and re-established their rule. The forced Muslim conversion probably weakened the Ghana Empire, but the more important weakening was actually unintended by the Berbers: the herding, pastoralist economy and practices of the Berbers spoiled the land and soil of the Ghana Empire, and doomed it to the dryness that currently exists in the parts of modern-day Mauritania and Mali where Ghana once flourished.

Because the Ghana Empire that the now-more-Muslim Soninke reconquered was not the same as the old Ghana Empire due to the changes caused by the brief Almoravid ownership, they had trouble returning to their former wealth and power. In the early 13th century, before Ghana eventually succumbed to the Mali Empire, it fell victim to the Soso people, a neighboring, fellow Mande-speaking ethnicity. The Soso, formerly a tributary to Ghana seceded[[81]](#footnote-81) and rose up, possibly even enslaving the Soninke.[[82]](#footnote-82) The most significant similarity between the Almoravids and the Soso, the two groups that weakened the Ghana Empire, was that they were religiously homogenous. The difference is that Soso were pagan, while the Almoravids were Muslim. Neither of these groups understood the importance of the cooperation of religions at the time, which is what made them unsuccessful at extracting nearly as much wealth from the Western Sudan as Ghana did. The fact that the main weakening forces in the Ghana Empire were religiously contiguous powers, equally unsuccessful at ruling the Western Sudan, says something about the Western Sudan at that time: it needed a neutral, not a Muslim, and not a pagan.

However, the damage was done. By the mid-13th century, Ghana had been pillaged, raided, and attacked, its land marred permanently, and its union of Muslim with pagan destroyed. Furthermore, during its decline starting in 1076, traders were forced to find new routes through the Sahara that circumvented Ghana, and Koumbi-Saleh lost its status as the most important “port” city on the Sahel. In this condition and this condition only was it possible for Ghana to be conquered by a mono-religious empire like Mali. The explanation for Mali’s success despite its lack of religious diversity would have to be a change in time. Mali did not pacify Ghana until about 200 years after Ghana’s peak, and by that time, the world had changed significantly. Most notably, the Crusades had begun, launching the Mediterranean into an all-out holy war. A religiously neutral Mali would have never been able to trade with a Muslim empire in the middle of an existential holy war. Picking sides was not just an option, it was a requirement by the time Mali had taken over. Religious tolerance was necessary for Ghana because of its location *and* its time, but by Mali’s time, the Western Sudan required something else.

Other, smaller issues also helped cause the decline of the empire, from infighting among nobility to the discovery of new gold mines that got rid of the absolute dependence on the Wangara mines.[[83]](#footnote-83) But, since these causes were neither focused on by the Arab historians of the era nor endorsed by the griots, there is no option but to quantify them as minimal reasons for Ghana’s fall.

The Soninke griots, their trained oral historians, make little mention of the Almoravids, and the Soso, or even really Mali. They view Ghana as the 3rd iteration of their civilization called Wagadu.[[84]](#footnote-84) Each one of these civilizations was eventually destroyed by human error, and the human error listed for Ghana was “greed.”[[85]](#footnote-85) This may refer to the capture of Awdaghost that led to the unifying of the Berbers against the Soninke, but it could also refer just to the sheer size of the Ghana Empire, at its peak roughly the size of Texas.[[86]](#footnote-86) This size was far more than could be handled, which eventually led to its defeat. However, a third option is also possible for the expression of the Soninke’s fatal greed, which involves the orally passed on story of Ghana’s fall. The story began with the beginning of the Ghana Empire, with Dinga’s (or his son’s) founding and compromise with the snake for an annual virgin and filly sacrifice. In the year of Ghana’s defeat, the griots selected a girl named Siya for the sacrifice to the well snake Bida because of her exceptionalness in the usual criteria: beauty, grace, chastity, and cleanliness.[[87]](#footnote-87) This was a problem because Siya was already engaged to an orphaned man with a “soaked character”.[[88]](#footnote-88) While she was honored to be selected, her fiancée was enraged and attempted to kill the snake, but before the snake died, he cursed Ghana to 7 years and 7 months of drought,[[89]](#footnote-89) which caused the Soninke to migrate in all directions[[90]](#footnote-90) just to stay alive.

Most likely, there was either a severe drought or the aggressive herding of the Almoravids destroyed the land, but the griots’ story should not be overlooked just because of its talking animals or supernatural events. The griots’ story of the fall of Ghana may be closer to what Westerners deem folklore than what they deem history, but the story has a moral even if it isn’t 100% factual. The story of Siya, her fiancée, and the snake, is one of the preservation of tradition, and the dangers of ignoring it. This speaks to the fundamental key to Ghana’s success: keeping traditionalism intact. Similar to how the kingdom suffered because of Siya’s fiancée’s selfishness, the Ghana Empire would have suffered too if the king or the merchants had chosen selfishness by converting the pagans.

**Concluding**

The Empire of Ghana was built fundamentally not just on trade, but on tolerance. From its origins as the unification of faraway people with Sudanese people, as some postulate, to the interbreeding of two distinct groups of people (the Berbers and the Gangara), as others postulate, tolerance of foreign people is a key to its origin. Even if one does not subscribe to either of these two views, the Soninke only became rich *because* of their ability to trade with both white and black, Saharan and Sudanese, salt and gold. The unrelenting gold miners of the Gold Coast just south of Ghana, side-by-side with the Muslim merchant of the trans-Saharan caravan trade together made Ghana’s location special.

Fortunately, the Soninke realized the importance of this duality and did everything in their power to preserve it, employing Muslims in government and giving them different rules in their etiquette towards the king, and segregating the capital city to keep both sides happy. Having their subjects pacified by this religious tolerance, Ghana’s government set about extracting money from the kingdom, mostly via tariffs on goods both entering and exiting the empire, which was located in a strategic location as to ensure passing through it was necessary to trade between North and sub-Saharan Africa. The bulk of this tariff revenue was generated taxing the gold-salt trade, which grew and grew as more and more Arabic empires needed gold for their currency and the growing populations in Ghana and the rest of sub-Saharan required salt to live.

This empire of tolerance couldn’t last forever, and when it was briefly overrun by the zealous Almoravids, their herding methods ruined the fertile soil. Then the pagan Soso controlled the empire, further ravaging the empire. And, by the time these two powers had finished hurting Ghana, religious tolerance was near impossible, and a fellow Mande-speaking ethnicity named Mandinka conquered Ghana once and for all and established the kingdom of Mali. Setting aside political chronology, the fall was caused by an abandonment of tradition, at least according to the oral historians. This statement certainly has legs, as the abandonment of farming in favor of herding devastated the land and the abandonment of religious tolerance devastated the gold production. The fall of Ghana was not so much about trade routes as it was about tradition, which is what drives home the central message of the Ghana Empire. As society changes, for better or for worse, one must remember its traditions, and be tolerant of those that still live by them, especially when it comes to religion.

**Post-Script**

I set out to complete this study because of Ghana’s importance to Africa. If you choose any region on Earth, it will have been the richest one on Earth during only a few times. The heyday of the Mediterranean was the time of the Roman Empire in the 500 years roughly surrounding the year 0. Anatolia and Balkans? Ancient Greece during the first millennium BCE. South America? The Incas during the 1400s and 1500s. North America? USA in the 20th and 21st century. Africa? 800-1400. Something about these time periods for these regions caused these empires to accumulate vast wealth unmatched across the world. The period in Africa had three major empires: Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. Ghana was the first of the three, and I sought the reason why. Why Ghana, why then, especially while Europe was in the middle of its Dark Ages? And the answer is that Ghana needed the same economic brilliance as all other empires to flourish, but they also needed tolerance, something Europe didn’t have.

We can learn a lot from the fact that the greatest period of African wealth originated with tolerance. The subjugation of the entire continent during colonialism stuffed groups of people together who could tolerate each other probably in a similar way to Ghana’s toleration of people: six miles apart, participating in trade. These groups of people in Africa, forever separated by race, religion, culture, cuisine, economic practices and more were never meant to be in the same army, forced next to each other, or in the same rubber forest or the same salt deposit or the same gold mines, which might explain why they were kept secret for so long. A good example of the craziness of colonialism, especially in West Africa, lies in a simple google search for Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. They both have an ethnic majority of Fula, and a major ethnic minority of Mandinka, so why are they not just the same country? The answer is that Guinea-Bissau was colonized by Portugal, whereas Guinea was colonized by France. The better question is why are the Mandinka not their own country and so too the Fula? It makes no sense for the Fula to be the largest minority in both countries. Colonialism stretched the tolerance of Africans, and demonstrated the intolerance of the Europeans.

Nonetheless, colonialism has passed, and despite there being lessons to learn from its history, it cannot be changed. The story of Ghana showed expertly the problems with colonialism, but it also showed that the only solution can only be found through tolerance. Picking sides is not necessary in today’s world, in fact it would only hurt, as in Ghana’s world. It is too late for the African nation-state; colonialism ruined Africa’s chance at that. But, being as we can’t go back in time to prevent colonialism, Africa must move forward. The future of Africa is not division, ethnically, religiously, or any other, but rather tolerance.

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