The Nok Culture

Among the Neolithic and Iron Age societies of West Africa, the Nok culture is perhaps the earliest and best known, dating back to 1000 BC. The highly developed society flourished on the Jos plateau, overlooking the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers, and had a far-reaching sphere of influence. The soil at the archaeological sites of Taruga and Jos was perfect for preserving the ancient pottery and terracotta sculptures of the Nok people; their intricate carvings of humans and animals ranged from life-size to an inch (2.5 cm).

Thanks to the discovery of iron tools and artifacts at Nok, scholars know that the Iron Age began in West Africa around 500 AD, whereas even in Egypt and North Africa, the use of iron was not yet widespread. Unlike most other cultures transitioning from the Neolithic to the Iron Age, the Nok went directly from stone to iron, without first using bronze or copper. This leads researchers to wonder if the iron-making technology was brought to the area from outside, or if the Nok discovered it themselves.

Djenné-Djenno

Djenné-Djenno was an ancient city, sustaining a substantial population, as evidenced by the crowded cemeteries excavated at the site. The people there likely grew their own food: unlike the arid conditions in that area today, rainfall would have been plentiful back then. The inhabitants of Djenné-Djenno were skilled metalworkers, creating iron tools and jewelry.

The city was part of a well-developed trade network, although there is some debate over the extent of it. The absence of any local sources of iron ore for their metal industry and the presence of Roman and Hellenistic beads at the site lead some scholars to believe the city had trade connections to distant lands.

Migrations

The Bantu people originated in present-day central Nigeria, but began their migration to central, and later southern Africa around 1000 BC. By this time, there are few, if any, Bantu left in the region, but echoes of their culture and traditions still resonate throughout West Africa.

Around 200 AD, Akan groups begin their migration west, from the area around lake Chad. Over the next centuries, they will move across rivers and through dense forests to reach the coast of present-day Ghana.
Little is known about the Bura culture in the lower Niger River Valley other than it thrived between the 3rd and 13th centuries AD and produced distinctive artifacts of stone, iron, and clay. The discovery of a necropolis in Bura in 1975, and later, of religious and dwelling sites in the surrounding area is relatively recent, and it may take a while to gain a better understanding of the mysterious culture.

In the necropoles, a particular type of coffin in the shape of eathenware jars were found, decorated with elaborate anthropomorphic representations and containing human skulls. Under the jars were more human bones. Even further down, archaeologists uncovered entire human skeletons resting on neck supports and wearing copper bracelets identical to those represented on the sculptures on the jars above. Iron arrowheads were found almost systematically near the skulls buried above, which leads some scholars to hypothesize that those men might have been guardians of the dead, sacrificed to accompany the more important figures below in the afterlife.

Taghazza, located in the northern tip of present-day Mali, would become a productive salt mining village ruled and controlled by Berber people from the Maghreb and, thanks to its bottomless resources, quickly developed into an important stop on the trans-Saharan trade routes.

Also founded and ruled by the Berber, Takedda, in central present-day Niger, was inhabited by Tuareg people, and would become a major trading center in western Sudan, as well as a productive red copper mining city.

Islam
622 AD marks the year when the Islamic prophet Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina in his hijra and is the starting point of the Muslim calendar. From there, Islam slowly made its way west and south, through the Sahara, brought by itinerant merchants, in particular Berber traders from North Africa, who, after being invaded by Muslim Arabs, eventually accepted the new religion.
700 AD: Rise of the Ghana Empire

Ghana might have first been established as a city-state as early as the 3rd century, founded by the Soninke as a trade post. It grew into a kingdom and by 700 AD, West Africa’s first significant empire. Kumbi Saleh served as the empire’s — and the region’s first — capital city, connected to the developing Trans-Saharan trade routes. The population of the early empire was diverse, including many ethnic groups like the Ewe, Mande, Berber from the north, and of course, the Soninke.

The empire’s geographical situation, positioned near the gold fields of Bambuk, Bure, and Wangara and squarely in the center of the salt trade between the north and south, would allow it to grow a robust economy. By the 8th century, the Ghana Empire was already known as the “land of gold” throughout the region and far beyond, its reputation spreading like wildfire along the trade routes to North Africa.

[Fig. 1] “Guerriers Sarrakholais” - Soninke Warriors, 1890
800 AD: Takrur and Gao

**Takrur**
Established by the Tukulor people of the Senegal river valley, the kingdom of Takrur was the first state in the region to embrace Islam. Despite becoming a powerful Islamic state, Takrur could never shake the control of its powerful neighbors, first being under the thumb of the Ghana Empire, and later, conquered by the Mali Empire.

Writing much later, in 1240, Ibn Sa'id described the aristocracy of Takrur and its affinity with the white traders from the Maghreb; they imitated their dress and their food. He also described two distinct sections of the Takrur population: the sedentaries, ancestors of the present Tukulor people, and the nomads, who would become the Fulani people.

**Gao (or Kaw-Kaw)**
The beginnings of the city of Gao are unclear. It started off sometime in the 7th century, either as a Songhai fishing village or a settlement founded by Berber gold traders. Regardless, it quickly blossomed into one of the first great trading centers in West Africa. The Gao Empire grew around the city along the Niger river under Songhai leadership. In the 9th century, Gao was already an important regional power.

[Fig 2] Toucouleur Types - Tukulor Types, 1890
Birth of Kanem

Kanem was a kingdom centered on the northeastern shore of Lake Chad, whose subjects were a mixture of Berber, Duguwa and Zaghawa peoples.

Unlike the western empires of Ghana and Gao, Kanem's wealth was not based on gold. Instead, the kings of Kanem built their empire on livestock as well as slave-raiding, powered by a large cavalry. In the 9th century, the people of Kanem still lived as nomads, in temporary settlements and dwellings made out of reeds. Over the course of this century, they went through a process of sedentarization around the humid lands of the Lake Chad basin.

The ruler of Kanem was said by Muslim visitors to be "worshipped instead of God", enslaving any of his subjects at a whim, and if anyone happened across the camels carrying his personal provisions of food, they would be killed on the spot to maintain the illusion that the king did not eat.

Ghana Flourishes

In the west, the Ghana Empire acquired the important Saharan trade center of Audaghost, marking the beginning of a long golden age for the realm. Like many other smaller kingdoms in the area, Takrur was incorporated into the empire's dominion, although it continued to flourish under Ghanaian rule. The rulers of the subjugated states were allowed to continue governing their lands, while the king of Ghana kept centralized control over the empire.

Al-Bakri, the renowned Arab historian and geographer later wrote about the pomp and ceremony surrounding the animist kings of Gao and Ghana. The historian described the lavish wardrobe that set the King of Ghana apart from the rest: he wore a gilded cap and turban, many necklaces and bracelets, and only he and his heir apparent could wear sewn clothes. His subjects prostrated themselves at his approach and sprinkled earth or ashes onto their heads, a practice al-Bakri noted because of its affront to Islam, although he did say the Muslims were spared the custom and only required to politely clap their hands.

In Kaw-Kaw (Gao), the king's meals were ritualized, al-Bakri related, with women dancing to the beat of drums and all business suspended during that time. Shouts and yells sounded throughout the city to announce the end of every single royal meal.
In the Hausa-speaking region of present-day northern Nigeria, several city-states were established. Islamic travelers in the region described Gobir, Kano, Daura and other settlements as walled towns called birnis. Those cities were the capitals in a feudal system where each local ruler controlled their own army of armed horsemen. Some of the towns’ beginnings can be traced back to the 5th and 6th centuries, but the individual city-states only came together as an alliance of semi-divine kings in the 11th century.

Hausa oral traditions speak of Bayajida, a mythical prince from the Middle East who is thought to be the common ancestor of the Hausa people. The descendants of his first son, born of his queen, supposedly founded the seven original and “true” states, called Hausa Bakwai: Kano, Rano, Daura, Biram, Gobir, Katsina and Zazzau (later called Zaria). The rest of the states are called the Banza Bakwai, the “false” or “bastard” states, because they are thought to have been founded by the descendants of Bayajida’s other son, who was born of a concubine. The false states vary depending on the source, but they are thought to include Nupe, Zamfara, Kebbi, Gwari, Kawararafa (also known as Jukun), Ilorin, Yauri and Yoruba.

These states were a loose confederation, never developing a central authority, and rivalries between them over political and trading rights led to skirmishes from time to time. This bickering made the Hausa states vulnerable to other African powers: at various times in their history, they were forced to pay tribute to several other powers, including Kanem-Bornu and the Songhai Empire.

But they were also allied and cooperative, which allowed each state to develop its own specialty based on need and location. For instance:

- Zazzau became a raiding state, “the chief of slaves”, the supplier of captives and hostages, who were sent to work in the fields of the agriculture-focused state of Kebbi.
- Daura literally means “blacksmith”, and was naturally focused on craftsmanship and trade, as was Katsina, situated as it was on the caravan routes. Katsina and Daura were called the “chiefs of trade”.
- Rano and Kano, the “chiefs of indigo”, produced cotton and had a strong monopoly on fine cloth and textiles.
- Gobir, the northernmost state, was the “chief of war”, protecting the others from outside threats like Kanem-Bornu and the Ghana Empire.
Ghana
In 1072, under the leadership of Abu Bakr ibn Umar, the Almoravids from North Africa (present-day Morocco and Mauritania) led a jihad against the Sudanese, both those inhabiting the desert and those of the Sahel. The Ghana Empire was conquered, plundered, and forced to pay tribute. By 1076, the people of Ghana were converted to Islam. After Abu Bakr ibn Umar died, the Almoravids were distracted by internal affairs and quickly lost control over their Sudanese territories.

Ghana regained its independence and although it still attracted trade, it could not regain its former power. It lost exclusive control over the gold and the Trans-Saharan trade it depended on.

By now a powerful Islamic state, Takrur had been allied to the Almoravids, whose victory over the Ghana Empire had strengthened and enriched them. They seized the opportunity to declare their independence from the weakened Ghana.

Kanem
Changes were happening in Kanem as well, with the rise of a new dynasty, the Sayfawa, whose leader, Hummay, was a Muslim who took power around 1075.

Although Islam wasn’t unheard of before then — most of the previous rulers had at least read the Koran — Hummay is considered to be the pioneer of the religion in Kanem. By all accounts a pious man, Hummay was said to have given generous alms to the Muslim missionary who instructed him in the Koran: 100 slaves, 100 camels, 100 gold coins, and 100 silver coins.

[Fig 3] Group of Kanem-Bu Warriors, 1890
Break-up of the Ghana Empire

By the 13th century, the Soninke Empire of Ghana was hopelessly fragmented. The Diarra, who had been accumulating power, broke away and the seeds of the Mali Empire were being planted.

Another group of Soninke people from the south, the Susu, untouched by the northern influence of — and conflicts with — Islam, rose to prominence. Sumanguru Kante, leader of the Susu, took over the former territories of Ghana and was known to harass and persecute the Muslim traders there. Predictably, relations soured and trade shriveled under this rule.

Meanwhile, the Malinke people had been developing chiefdoms, each regrouping several neighboring villages between the Niger and Senegal rivers, ruled by different Malinke clans. The hunters played an important role in uniting these clans, since their esoteric association cut across clan, status, and caste. The future kings of Mali came from the Keita clan, who are described in oral traditions as hunter-kings. In the early 13th century, though, the process of unification of the Malinke people as part of the future Mali Empire was disrupted when they were subjugated by the powerful Susu king, Sumanguru.

Birth of the Kingdom of Benin

Far to the southeast, near the coast of the gulf of Guinea, a small kingdom was emerging from the city-state of Benin. Oral traditions of the region suggest that Benin’s royal dynasty was an offshoot of the monarchy of Ife, further to the northwest. Archaeological excavations and studies of the iconic bronze-casting tradition of the Benin Kingdom seem to support this idea.

This traditional, intricate art of bronze-casting was originally very expensive and only sovereigns could afford to commission their making, which closely tied the bronze-worker guilds to the royal courts. This was because of the scarcity of copper and its alloys; the early casts were often so thin that Europeans of the time would have considered their making impossible — which is a testament to the technical skill of bronze-casters.
Birth of the Mali Empire
The Malinke clans and chiefdoms, united under the legendary Sundiata Keita, declared a war of independence from the Susu. The decisive battle of Kirina on the Niger is dramatized in the griots’ songs and stories as an epic battle between two powerful sorcerers, Sumanguru and Sundiata. After Sundiata’s victory in this battle around 1235, his army went on to conquer territories in every direction, though how far is unclear.

After the war of liberation, the Malinke chiefs swore fealty to Sundiata as their sovereign, who distributed to each a chiefdom. This marked the founding of the Mali Empire, with the Keita clan as the ruling dynasty.

Kanem’s Stretch
Now very devoted to Islam, Kanem grew towards the north, spurred by the need to proselytize, as well as the allure of controlling and securing the trade routes running towards Cairo. Mai (King) Dunama Dabbalemi conquered his way into Fezzan, the southwestern part of modern-day Libya, establishing a new capital in Traghan.

Trouble was brewing at home, though. Oral traditions relate Dabbalemi’s destruction of the mune, a sacred, pre-Islamic talisman of Kanem, which, according to the stories, triggered much of the trouble that followed. Even many moderate Muslims in the realm didn’t appreciate the sacrilegious act. Whether or not this was the underlying cause, divisions were occurring among his sons, and this state of affairs only worsened after his death…
Mali Empire
The kings of Mali ruled from their capital in Niani, the ancestral village of the Keita clan. Sundiata’s son, Mansa Uli, was probably responsible for conquering most of the Malian territory, including Timbuktu and Gao. A few weaker kings succeeded him, until a freed slave took power, Mansa Sakura. This king re-conquered Gao, where rebellious Songhai had declared their independence under his predecessor’s rule. After him, the throne reverted back to the legitimate heirs of Sundiata’s dynasty.

The 30 year reign of Mansa Musa I — one of Sundiata’s great-nephews —, from around 1307 to 1337, marked a golden age for the Mali Empire. Though not the first Malian king to undertake the year-long journey to Mecca, Mansa Musa’s famous pilgrimage in 1324 left a deep impression on Egypt and literally put his empire on the map.

Under his rule, Mali stretched to its furthest limits, from the Gambia and the Senegal river valleys in the west, to Gao in the east. Mansa Musa also encouraged the pursuit of knowledge, particularly as regarding Islam, by building and funding universities and mosques. Timbuktu flourished as a center for learning, as well as a center of the Trans-Saharan gold and salt trade.

Kanem
After Mai Dabbalemi’s death, the civil strife and struggles for succession caused Kanem’s grip on the Fezzan (modern-day southwestern Libya) to slip, with the mai’s representative there declaring himself independent and founding his own dynasty. Still plagued with internal strife, Kanem struggled to hold itself together.

[Fig. 4] Mansa Musa I depicted on the Catalan Atlas, 1375
Weakening of the Mali Empire
After Mansa Musa’s reign, a string of disinterested rulers, assassinations and coups d’Etats plagued the Mali Empire, until it became weak and started loosing its grip on many of its remote areas, most notably by the 1400s, the Songhai of Gao and the Jolof in the west.

Always rebellious, the Songhai of Gao took the opportunity to break away for good, something they fought for many times in the past without long-lasting success.

North of the Gambia, the Wolof seized their independence under Ndiadiane N’Diaye, the first burba (ruler) of the Djolof empire. The burba was picked by a college of electors, which included the rulers of the vassal states like Cayor, Baol and Walo. Apart from sending annual gifts to the burba, these rulers were virtually autonomous. It’s very likely that they often elected weak burbas, who they expected not to interfere with their affairs.

The Tuareg of Timbuktu, who had long acknowledged Mali’s authority, would soon also realize the weakness of the empire’s military.

Kanem and Bornu
In the East, internal wars were still raging, as well as threats from cadet branches of the royal line vying for the throne.

On top of that, Arabs from the east were encroaching. These Arabs enslaved and sold the Muslim citizens of Kanem and killed a brother of the mai. Harrased from all fronts, Mai Omar ibn Idris, accompanied by his court and his followers, was forced to flee Kanem and settle south of Lake Chad, around 1390. This exodus was the foundation for the new kingdom of Bornu.

From this point on, the histories of the two kingdoms of Kanem and Bornu are so intertwined — the kingdoms often merging into one — that it is virtually impossible to separate one from the other and they are usually discussed as one: Kanem-Bornu.

Oyo
The origins of the Oyo kingdom, though murky and steeped in local legends that have more to do with the needs of later rulers than historical fact, can be traced back to this period, although the small kingdom seems to have been of little significance until the 17th century. It will become a powerful nation, whose traditions had a great influence on mainstream Yoruba culture, even to this day.
The decline of the Mali Empire left a political vacuum that the Songhai of Gao were only too happy to fill.

Songhai Conquests

Seeing the weakness of the Mali Empire, the Tuareg initially raided Timbuktu, perhaps testing the empire’s strength. It found very little resistance and around 1433 the Tuareg changed tactics, deciding to offer their protection to the city’s governor in exchange for tribute. But the protector soon turned oppressor, abusing the people of the city. Timbuktu’s governor offered the city’s unconditional surrender to the Songhai in exchange for ridding them of the Tuareg. Sonni Ali, the Songhai king, obliged, driving the Tuareg and any of their supporters out of Timbuktu.

Sonni Ali went on to conquer his way west along the Niger, making extensive use of the river with his fleet of Sorko fishermen. Djenné fell through starvation after a long siege with 400 boats during the period of high water.

Sonni Ali built many royal residences along the Niger, in Gao, Kukiya, Kabara, etc, but he never stopped long enough to enjoy any of them; he spent all his time warring.

Sultanate of Aïr

The desert-dwellers in the Aïr massif, in present-day central Niger, formed a sultanate that was reputed to be more powerful than its counterparts of Takedda and Tadmekka. Al-Umari reported that the main income of the sultanate was from their beasts of burden, notably camels, as their Tuareg inhabitants were instrumental in the carrying of goods through the desert. Besides the Tuareg, Hausa-speaking people formed the rest of the population.

The sultan of Aïr appears to have only served as an arbitrator for the different Tuareg factions and never built a strong centralized government. Only children of servile mothers (like concubines) could become sultans. Leo Africanus noted that the sultan had to please his subjects, or risk being deposed.
Askiya the Great’s Expansion
Where Sonni Ali was the “magician-king”, well-versed in the traditional mysticism of the Songhai, Askiya Muhammad, who took the throne in 1493, was the “pilgrim-king”. When Muhammad returned from his two-year pilgrimage very early in his reign, he brought back not only the title of al-hajj, but also that of caliph.

Where Sonni Ali had dealt with powerful Islamic scholars and politically-minded Muslims with ruthless persecution, Askiya Muhammad, as their caliph, brought them into the empire’s fold and thrived on their support.

Askiya Muhammad was able to extend the empire further than Sonni Ali through the creation of a professional army, which incorporated slaves from the conquered territories. Under him, the empire reached its fullest extent, sweeping the vestiges of Malian rule towards the west.

The Mossi and Borgu peoples fiercely resisted the rule of the Songhai and were considered their worst enemies. They were the only obstacles to the Songhai expansion towards the south.

Mossi Kingdoms
Different powerful states formed the Mossi Kingdoms in the region of the upper Volta river, though their histories are imprecise and full of contradictions. Oral traditions date the kingdoms back to anytime between the 11th and 15th centuries, although the early ancestors of the Mossi peoples are thought to have come into the Volta area around the 13th century.

By this time though, it is clear the Mossi Kingdoms were a powerful collective. Despite the Songhai jihad to convert them to Islam and conquer their territory, which wrought destruction upon them around 1497, they refused subjugation and fiercely opposed the Songhai at every turn.

Empire of Great Fulo
Under the leadership of Tengella (or Temala according to Portuguese records), Fulani migrants reached the area of Futa Jalon where they challenged the authority of Mali and brought together many different ethnic groups. They travelled north, past the Gambia and into the northern region of present-day Senegal, Futa Toro. Known as the “Great Fulo”, Tengella, as well as his son Koli and their descendents, the Denianke, pursued an expansionist policy, often clashing with the Mali and Songhai empires, as well as their Jolof neighbors.
**Destruction of the Songhai Empire**
Morocco’s invasion of the Songhai marked a major turning point in the history of West Africa.

Under financial strain and with grand ideas to create a magnificent caliphate in the Sudan to rival that of the Ottomans, the Empire of Morocco set its sights on the southern trade routes and the rich Songhai Empire.

The seemingly bottomless salt mines of Taghaza, very close to Moroccan border, were the first to be conquered in 1586. The town had been forewarned of the attack and its inhabitants had fled in time to avoid any bloodshed. The askiya of the Songhai didn't bother defending Taghaza because the mine was running dry and he had found another source of salt some distance away.

Tensions rose between the sultan of Morocco and the Songhai askiya, to the point where the Moroccans sent their army through the Sahara — where half of them perished — to Tondibi, where a decisive battle would take place. Though vastly outnumbered, the Moroccans were victorious due to the superior fire-power provided by the expensive muskets they had bought from European traders.

They went on to conquer Djenné, Timbuktu and Gao, though these trade centers never brought them the wealth and power they desired, and the logistics of ruling such remote areas across the desert proved prohibitive to further expansion. Under Moroccan rule, the once vibrant cities of Timbuktu and Gao shriveled out of neglect.

**Collapse of the Jolof Empire**
Along the coast of present-day Senegal, the kings of the vasal kingdoms of the Jolof Empire grew wealthier with coastal trade and more powerful than the Jolof king, or burba. The damel of Cayor was the first to break away, soon followed by the brak of Walo and the others.

[Fig. 5] A view of Timbuktu, 1857
The First Kingdom of Ségou
Kaladian Coulibaly tried to fill the void left by the Mali and Songhai empires with his first Bambara empire of Ségou. Though it was a dominant force in the region, his realm didn't outlast his death because it lacked any political organization, depending only on military feats to keep itself together. Fifty years later though, his grandson would take up the mantle and build the empire Kaladian dreamed of.

Denkiyra Rule
In the south, in present-day Ghana, the Akan people had organized into several states within the rich kola nut and gold-filled forests and along the coasts. Denkiyra was the first to rule over many of them, growing powerful with their tight grip on the abundant trade that Europeans were bringing in from the coast. The Denkyira kings were said to have created ornaments out of freshly mined gold for every ceremonial occasion and had shields and swords adorned with gold. The Ashanti, though, had plans brewing to consolidate their power and overthrow their Denkyira overlords...

The Slave Trade
By this time, the transatlantic slave trade was in full swing, but the concept was far from foreign to the West Africans. As in most other parts of the world, slaves always were an important part of trade and source of labor there.

Domestic Slave Trade
Throughout its history, much of West Africa suffered from chronic under-population due to high infant mortality which slowed the natural growth rate to the point where it was insufficient to withstand drought, epidemics and wars. Slave imports were a remedy to that.

In Kanem-Bornu, a wealthy individual might own thousands of slaves, while a person of modest means often had at least two or three.

Slaves could be found at every level of West African society: they were farmers, miners, builders, cloth workers, cooks, salt workers, pageboys, concubines, even delegate merchants in trade caravans. In some areas, like the Hausa states, a slave could hope to gain important governmental offices. In Bornu, the army was composed mostly of state or king-owned slaves, even in positions of high military command. A 19th century Hausa man who had been a slave in Bornu said: “the country of Bornu — I am telling the truth — is a country of slaves.”

It would be easy to draw from this picture, and from the lack of slave rebellions in West African history, that slaves were well-treated. But recurrent references to runaway slaves and captives, some even fleeing alone far into the
Sahara desert where their chances of survival were close to none, show that many found their prospects unbearable.

**Transatlantic Slave Trade**

So when the Portuguese merchants in Elmina castle first asked to purchase slaves from the coastal kingdoms in the 16th century, the Africans saw no reason to prevent the Europeans from participating in the slave trade. After all, they had sold their slaves to the white-skinned North Africans before. And the coastal kingdoms, like Ashanti, Oyo and Benin profited immensely from the trade of slaves with the Europeans.

The Atlantic slave trade stands out because of the sheer volume of slaves shipped across the ocean in such a short period of time — 12 million slaves taken from Africa as a whole by current estimates, around a third from West Africa. This massive demand for slaves precipitated political instability in the region due to rivalries between African nations competing for the trade, and ever more violent slave-raids fueled by new firearms supplied by the Europeans. Also heightened by the Transatlantic slave trade was the factor of race, spurring an inhumanity that hadn't been quite so present previously.

![A Slave Market, 1893](image)

![Capturing Slaves, 1893](image)
Rise of the Ashanti Empire
Uniting the Ashanti people through the clever use of regalia and symbols of unity, such as the golden stool, Osei Tutu capitalized on the ill-will engendered by the bullying Denkyira to overthrow them. The Ashanti became and remained the dominating empire in the Gold Coast until the British conquest. The empire grew powerful through a strong military force and a focus on gold and kola nut trade, as well as European commerce from the coast.

Emergence of Ségou and Kaarta
The kingdom of Ségou formed around Biton Mamari Coulibaly, who consolidated power through the traditional association of young men, the ton. He restructured Bambara society to revolve and be dominated by the ton, which previously had only existed to render services to the community. Through this clever manipulation, Biton Coulibaly founded the Bambara Empire of Ségou.

Kaarta was also a Bambara kingdom, founded by Massa, a renowned farmer distantly related to Biton. Through an aggressive raiding policy and a strategy of marrying his numerous daughters to common folk rather than princes, Massa’s kingdom of Kaarta grew.

Ségou and Kaarta were rivals ever since their founding and fights between the two Bambara kingdoms broke out regularly. Ségou was the more powerful state, centered on richer lands along the Niger river which could support a bigger population, so it won most of the conflicts, pushing Kaarta ever further westwards.

[Fig. 8] Type bambara, 1885
Futa Jallon
The semi-nomadic pastoral Fula people settled in the region of Futa Jallon between the 11th and 13th centuries. They practiced their traditional African religion, subordinate to the local chiefs, constantly having to negotiate for pasture for their ever-increasing herds due to European demand for wool. Their Muslim kinsmen migrated from Futa Toro in the 16th century and challenged the existing order, offering their cousins better leadership.

Islam was the banner under which the Fula united in a national uprising to free themselves from political and economic subordination. There was no one state to take over in the area; they had to build a brand new one themselves, which is probably why the jihad they waged lasted so long: five decades, from 1725 to 1776.

Futa Jallon was the first of many theocratic Fula states to come. Governed by strict Sharia law, they were propelled to conquer the surrounding pagans, both because of religious conviction, as well as to collect slaves to sell to European traders.

Kong Empire
Kong (also known as Wattara) was established by the Dyula ethnic group and might have been the first Mande state to base its power on firearms. The Dyula had extensive contact with the Europeans as a result of the group being composed mostly of merchants. The state of Kong grew organically, under its own dynamism, out of the need to safeguard trade towns. Of course, the protection of a trading center naturally called for the protection of its feeder routes as well, to secure the flow of trade.

Oyo Empire and Dahomey
In the south, the Oyo Empire rose to its fullest height, backed by a mighty cavalry, with horses supplied from the north. In the 1700s, Oyo became a major exporter of slaves acquired through raids on their neighbors.

Like Benin, Oyo was a Yoruba state, bound to protect the city of Ife, which was the religious center for the Yoruba. At his coronation, the Alafin (king) of Oyo was traditionally presented with the ida oranyan (sacred sword of state) and in exchange for this symbol of spiritual authority, he had to promise to safeguard Ife. In 1793, Alafin Awole would violate these ancestral customs by attempting to raid Ife for captives, which would lead to internal uprisings and civil wars that Oyo would not recover from.

Positioned as it was on the trade routes between the other Yoruba kingdoms and the Hausa States, Oyo dominated kingdoms between the Volta and Niger rivers. Political relations between Oyo and Dahomey were always tense, as
they were rivals in the trade of human captives. Dahomey was located in southern present-day Republic of Benin and composed of Fon people, ruled over by the Aja people. Oyo invaded Dahomey many times and, in 1730, Dahomey realized it could not withstand the powerful attacks of Oyo and surrendered. Under Oyo rule, however, Dahomey grew and prospered until it was able to free itself from subservience to Oyo by the 1800s.

[Fig. 9] An almamy of Futa-Jallon, 1902
Islam was introduced to Hausaland some time in the 14th century, although it didn't take hold until the 15th century. Even then, it became a “mixed” Islam, an eclectic blend of Islamic and animist customs and practices, which was characteristic of West Africa over the centuries preceding the jihads and, to some extent, still is.

The Sokoto Caliphate rose from a hotly debated controversy in Hausaland. Intellectual Muslim Fulani elites opposed, with various levels of zeal, this bastardized form of Islam in favor of pure religious orthodoxy. Other Muslim literates, though, didn't see anything wrong with the mixing of Islam with local practices, especially those who stood to lose their positions at Hausa courts as scribes, councillors, horoscopers, rain-makers, etc.

Shaihu Usman dan Fodio was an intelligent and pious young scholar who took a moderate approach to this debate, rejecting the extremist views, but also condemning complacency. Convinced he was this century's mujaddid — “Renewer of the Faith” sent by Allah every hundred years to reform Islam —, he travelled around the Hausa states, making allies and enemies as he preached more to the Muslims about reform than to the pagans about Islam.

In this tense atmosphere, armed conflict was inevitable and a mere misunderstanding sparked the jihad in Hausaland. This culminated in the establishment of a Muslim empire ruled by Shaihu Usman and his jihadists from the walled city of Sokoto.

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1800 AD: Birth of the Sokoto Caliphate

[Fig. 10] Usman's manuscript about the art of ruling, 1754-1817
Slavery was abolished in Britain in 1807 and its navy patrolled the coasts of Africa to apprehend illegal slave shipments and set the captives free. The economies of African kingdoms suffered under this embargo on slaves, particularly the coastal kingdoms of Oyo, Ashanti, Dahomey and Benin.

**Massina Empire**

Inspired by Shaihu Usman's jihad in Hausaland and reputed to have studied under him, Ahmadu bin Muhammadu Lobbo, a Muslim Fulani, raised a jihad against the Fulani chiefs of the Massina region, accusing them of idolatry. For centuries, they had accepted pagan rule under the Bambara of Ségou, and their subjects were practicing mixed Islam.

The jihad expanded to target the Bambara, the Bozo, and any other pagan or partially Islamized group, and ultimately led to the founding of the Massina Empire, stretching from Timbuktu to Djenné.

[Fig. 11] Fulah (Fulani) type, 1890
Tukulor Empire
Al-Hajj Umar Tall, born among the Tukulor people in Futa Toro, spent years in Mecca and Medina where he was appointed khalifa, or representative of Allah, of an Islamic order in the Sudan.

When he returned to his native area around 1848, the zealous cleric founded a theocracy near Futa Jallon and, with Tukulor support, waged a jihad against the animist Bambara states of Ségou and Kaarta. By 1862, Umar Tall’s empire had conquered the region, including Massina, and become a substantial power intent on moral reforms and ridding the area of any remnants of pagan belief and superstition, even among the Muslim populations.

The Tukulor Empire clashed with the French forces who were marching into the interior from the Senegalese coast. Ultimately, and despite its power, the Tukulor Empire was very short-lived, conquered with superior European firepower in 1893, only a few decades after al-Hajj Umar’s death.

Wassoulou Empire
Among the chiefs breaking away from the Tukulor Empire after Umar Tall’s death, Samori Touré, an uneducated Dyula chief, was the most successful. Well-equipped with European firearms thanks to the extensive trade of the Dyula merchants, Samori’s army took control of the Wassoulou region, establishing a new empire.

This empire was also short-lived, only lasting two decades before falling to the French colonial army in 1898.

Liberia
In the 1820s, the American Colonization Society (ACS), led by a group of wealthy white Americans, worked to resettle free blacks in Africa in part because their presence in the United States challenged the moral and legal basis for slavery. These initial black American immigrants were educated people who, in 1847, declared independence from the ACS and founded the republic of Liberia modeled after the United States.

A combination of military strength, trade agreements, and strategic marriages with prominent local families enabled the Americo-Liberians to exert control over the region. Their education gave them a sense of superiority over both the indigenous peoples and the freed field slaves that immigrated later, which led to discrimination, particularly when it came to education and business. But because there was no racial distinction between the locals and the newcomers, the former were able to gain access to higher positions, unattainable in the later European colonies, where skin color was an impassable barrier between the ruling elite and the common people.
Europeans had been in contact with West Africa for centuries, ever since Prince Henry, the Portuguese navigator, had gone on his mission to methodically explore the African coasts in the 15th century.

The Portuguese and, later, other European powers had been trading massive amounts of gold, ivory and slaves with the coastal kingdoms. They could take advantage of an already existing trade network and the profitable cowrie shell currency.

### Scramble for Africa

The Industrial Revolution brought with it many economic, social and political issues for the European countries: a new, pressing demand for raw materials, major domestic problems concerning employment, poverty, social displacement, etc., and an intense period of power struggles between nations.

So the Europeans turned their attention towards Africa. Establishing colonies there could solve many of those issues: it was rich in raw materials like rubber, palm oil, cotton, groundnut, etc., the “surplus population” of Europe could be sent there, and acquiring more territory was one way to demonstrate superiority over other European nations.

This volatile mix of economic, political and social factors led to the Scramble for Africa, a frenzied period of staking claims to territories for trade, of imposing tariffs against other European traders, of claiming exclusive control over waterways and commercial routes in different parts of Africa.

To avoid this situation devolving into serious conflicts and bitter wars between the European powers, the German chancellor, Otto van Bismark convened the Berlin Conference in 1884 to restore order to the colonization process.

### African Resistance

European countries began sending out agents to sign treaties with the leaders of African states, chieftdoms, kingdoms, empires, etc. Many Africans signed the treaties, believing them to be simple diplomatic and commercial friendship documents. To the Europeans though, these treaties meant that the Africans had signed away their sovereignties to European powers. When they realized they had been tricked and that the Europeans wanted to impose their authority on their lands and bypass African middle-men during trade negotiations, the African rulers organized their militaries to resist.
The leader of the new Wassoulou Empire, Samory Touré, managed to resist the French for sixteen years, from 1882 to 1898, using a mixture of strategies including direct engagement, guerrilla warfare and scorched earth policies. He acquired quick-firing rifles from other European merchants and established engineering workshops to repair them when needed.

The Ashanti Empire also held out a long while against the British in a series of Anglo-Ashanti wars, persevering even after the colonizers had exiled their king and seized their capital.

Despite the fierce resistance put up by the Africans, they couldn't match the sheer power of European arms. While the Africans fought with bows, spears, cavalries, and old rifles, the Europeans had access, thanks to the Industrial Revolution, to more deadly rifles, machine guns, and artillery guns.

In 1870, only 10% of the African continent was under European control. By 1914, 90% of it was colonized.

**Colonial Rule**

West Africa was colonized primarily by the French and the British. These two powers had very different philosophies when it came to governing their colonies.

In Nigeria and the Gold Coast, the British favored a system of indirect rule at the lower levels of government. This meant that wherever there were preexisting political institutions, the British operated in alliance with them, putting in place “native authorities”, “native treasuries” and “native courts”, which allowed the local population to rule themselves to some extent.

In contrast, the French favored a highly-centralized direct rule, with French citizens at every level of government. They also strove for a policy of assimilation, where they would take it upon themselves to lift the natives out of their “backwaters” to the status of French Africans, in a civilizing mission. If an African could speak fluent French, win awards and diplomas, and fulfill other demanding conditions, they could become French citizens. This ideology was difficult to put into practice though, since the French couldn't provide all the schools needed to educate their subjects and wouldn't establish the administrative and social frameworks to employ all their subjects.
During both world wars, African soldiers were conscripted into imperial armies, which led to greater political awareness and vague hopes of greater respect and self-determination.

After World War II, colonized populations created independence movements and indigenous political movements grew. With the reduction of raw materials being siphoned off to Europe, local businesses began growing in the colonies, towns turned into cities, and, with this new urbanization through industry, the people were empowered to create trade unions and gained access to better education and leadership positions.

Colonies throughout the continent organized the Pan-African Congress to advocate for a peaceful end to colonial rule. With the help of the United States, colonies put pressure on the imperial powers to comply with the Atlantic Charter, which had a provision stating colonies should have the right to self-rule.

All these factors combined to precipitate the decolonization process.

In 1957, Ghana was the first state in West Africa to achieve independence, the same year Chinua Achebe's book, *Things Fall Apart*, is published.

In 1958, Guinea declared its independence from France.

In 1960, "the year of Africa", many states achieved independence, including Burkina Faso, Dahomey (present-day Benin), the Ivory Coast, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, and the Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso).

In 1961, Sierra Leone became independent.

In 1965, The Gambia freed itself of colonial rule.

In 1974, Guinea-Bissau was the last West African state to get its independence.

By 1980, all of West Africa, and most of the continent, was independent again.
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