

## Introduction

The Songhay people built a kingdom not once, but twice. The first kingdom – the Kingdom of Gao – was conquered by Mansa Musa when the Kingdom of Mali fell, the Songhay people rose to power again and you are going to explore this second kingdom: the Kingdom of Songhay.

The history of the Kingdom of Songhay challenges European ideas that all African people shared the same culture, and that this culture was 'uncivilised'. The kingdom was impressive not just because of its size, but also because of the influence of Islam, its wealth, its connections with the wider world, and its importance as a centre of learning.

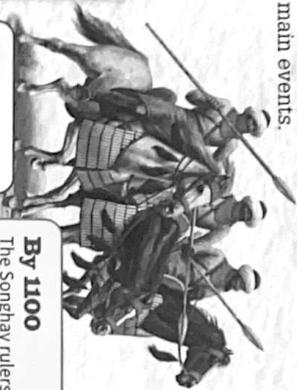
To help you throughout this chapter, we are going to start with advice on how to pronounce some names and places, a map of the kingdom and a timeline of the main events.

## GROUP 2.1

### How do I say?

When you start to learn about the history of another country, it can be difficult to know how to pronounce the names of people and places. Here is a handy guide to help you correctly say ten of the names you'll come across in this chapter. You emphasise the sound in bold.

- Askia: **ash**-kia
- Gao: **gaw**
- Djenne: **dj**-en
- Mansa Musa: **man**-sah **moos**-a
- Mūlāy Ahmad: **mo**-lay **akh**-med or **mo**-lay **ah**-med
- Songhay: **song**-hi
- Sonni 'Alī: **su**-**nee** a **lee**
- Timbuktu: **tim**-**buhk**-**too**
- Tondibi: **ton**-**dee**-**bee**



**Before 900**  
Horse-riding people, known as the Songhay, arrive and settle in the city of Gao

**By 1100**  
The Songhay rulers have grown the city of Gao into the wealthy Kingdom of Gao

**1460**  
Sonni Suleiman captures Mema, marking the beginning of the Kingdom of Songhay

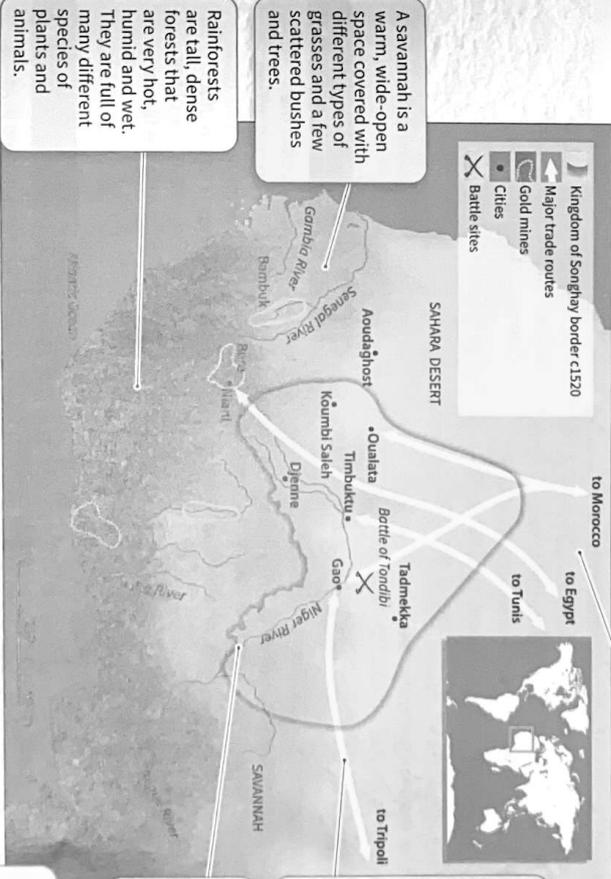
**1469**  
Sonni 'Alī captures Timbuktu



**1325**  
The city of Gao is captured by Mansa Musa and becomes part of the Kingdom of Mali

**1473**  
Sonni 'Alī captures Djenne

▼ **MAP A** A map of West Africa and the Kingdom of Songhay. Today, the borders of most countries are clearly defined: you know if you stand here you're in one country and if you stand there you're in another country, but we cannot be so certain about the position of borders, cities and trade routes during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in West Africa. Nevertheless, this map should help you understand where the Kingdom of Songhay was located, and where some of the key events you will learn about in this chapter took place.



The Sahara Desert is the third largest desert in the world. In summer it is one of the hottest regions in the world during the day, but the air becomes much cooler at night.

Major trade routes extended across the Sahara Desert to Morocco, Tunis and Tripoli, and on to Europe, China and Persia (a large kingdom centred in what is now modern-day Iran).

The Niger River is the main river in West Africa and provides water for drinking and farming.

**1591**  
The Songhay are defeated at the Battle of Tondibi by the Moroccan army. Over the next 20 years, the Kingdom of Songhay begins a process of permanent decline



**1538**  
Askia the Great is buried in the Tomb of Askia

**1496**  
Askia the Great performs Hajj. This is a pilgrimage to Makkah that all Muslims must complete once in their lives, if they are physically able to and can afford it.

**1493**  
Askia Mohammed (later known as Askia the Great) becomes ruler of the Kingdom of Songhay

**1528**  
Askia the Great is overthrown by his son, Musa

**1588**  
After years of civil war, Askia Ishaq II becomes ruler of the Kingdom of Songhay

**630s onwards:**  
After the death of Muhammad, the founder of Islam, the religion spreads to many parts of Africa and some African rulers convert to Islam

## How and why did the Kingdom of Songhay rise and fall? GROUP 2.2

The people of Songhay were horse-riding people who moved from town to town in the eighth century. By the fifteenth century, the Kingdom of Songhay was a powerful Muslim state that had taken over a lot of the Kingdom of Mali. The Kingdom of Gao had been reclaimed from the Kingdom of Mali and expanded, and the new kingdom included the city of Timbuktu, embracing all the riches and power the city had to offer. But who were the Songhay people? How did they rise to power... twice? And why did internal conflict bring an end to the Kingdom of Songhay?

### Objectives

- Identify the importance of the city of Gao.
- Explain how the fall of the Kingdom of Mali allowed for the rise of the Kingdom of Songhay.
- Describe how internal conflict led to the fall of the Kingdom of Songhay.

### 2.1A The Kingdom of Gao and Mansa Musa

#### The city of Gao

The history of the Kingdom of Songhay begins in a city called Gao. Gao was a small city on a bend of the Niger River. Like most cities in West Africa at this time, different groups of people lived and worked together: the Sorko, the Gao and the Doh.

The Sorko spent their days near the river, making boats and canoes from local trees, fishing and helping others cross the river. The Gao hunted and the Doh grew crops to feed the city. Together they made up the small but thriving city of Gao.

We can't be sure exactly when, but at some point before 900, people who could ride horses arrived and settled in the city of Gao. They spoke a language called Songhay.

#### Who were the Songhay?

Over the next 100 years or so, the Sorko, Gao, Doh and Songhay peoples came to speak the same language and became known as the Songhay.

Slowly, the Songhay began to spread outwards from the city of Gao, which became the centre of a large trade network. The Songhay people grew very rich by trading gold, kola nuts, enslaved people, leather and dates. Arab traders and scholars (highly educated people) travelled from the Middle East, all the way across the Sahara Desert, to trade with the Songhay people. They wrote accounts of the wealth they saw.

By the twelfth century, the city of Gao had grown and become the Kingdom of Gao. At its peak, seven other territories had sworn their loyalty to the Kingdom of Gao.

#### Fact

Nearly 1,000 years after the Songhay people arrived in Gao, Europeans trading in Africa took the kola nut back to the USA, where it was used as one of the main ingredients in the famous Coca-Cola drink.

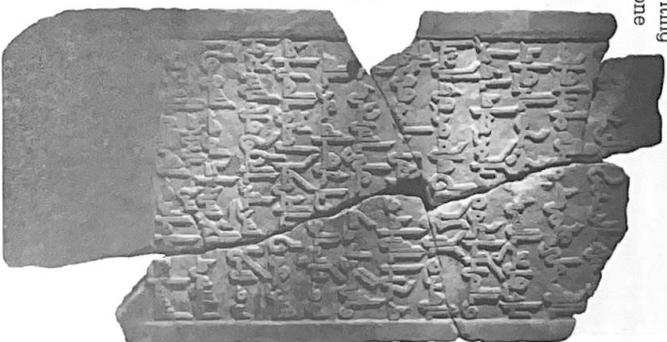
#### Fact

The slavery that existed in Africa at this time was not the same type of slavery that the Europeans introduced later, in the late fifteenth century. The European form of slavery was called 'chattel slavery'. A chattel slave was viewed as a piece of property, with no legal rights. In the Kingdom of Songhay, slavery was different. Enslaved people were usually prisoners of war. They were still exploited and made to work hard but, in time, they could become free. In contrast, chattel slaves were enslaved for life, as were their children and grandchildren, unless the slave owner decided differently.

### The Kingdom of Gao and Islam

As the Kingdom of Gao grew and contact with the Middle East increased, the dias (rulers) of Gao began to learn about Islam from Arab scholars. Dia Kossi converted to Islam and, from 1068, all dias had to be Muslim. However, some dias still practised other African religions alongside Islam, and people in the countryside, towns and villages were not usually Muslim.

**SOURCE A** A photograph of a tombstone found in the Kingdom of Gao. Some historians believe it belongs to an early Muslim ruler of the Kingdom of Gao. The writing on the tombstone is Arabic; the language of Islam.



**SOURCE B** An extract from an account of a visit to Gao, written by an Arab scholar called al-Muhallabi who died in 990.

Their king pretends before his subject to be a Muslim and most of them pretend to be Muslims too. He has a town on the Niger, on the eastern bank, which is called Sarāh, where there are markets and trading hours and to which there is continuous traffic from all parts. He has another town to the west of the Niger where he and his men... live.

#### Key Words

scholars dia Islam

#### Meanwhile...

1312

Mansa Musa ruled the Kingdom of Mali from 1312 to 1337. He has been described as the richest person in world history and under his leadership Mali became a global trading power and a centre for learning. To find out more about the Kingdom of Mali, look at the map and timeline on pages 8 and 9.

#### What happened to the Kingdom of Gao?

Mansa Musa, the ruler of the Kingdom of Mali, wanted control over the trading network at the heart of the Kingdom of Gao. In 1325, his army invaded. The wealthy city of Gao and the Kingdom of Gao were now part of Mansa Musa's vast kingdom. For the next 100 years, Mali would make a lot of money taxing the trade that passed through Gao. It wasn't until the Kingdom of Mali began to fall apart that the city of Gao and the people of Songhay would take back control of their land and wealth.

#### Over to You

- 1 List the types of jobs that people would have been doing in the city of Gao before the year 900.
- 2 Explain how the Kingdom of Gao became the centre of a wealthy trading network.

#### Source analysis

- 1 Look at **Source A**. What can you infer from the source about the importance of religion to Gao's rulers?
- 2 Read **Source B**. What can you infer from the source about the importance of religion to Gao's rulers?
- 3 Why might **Sources A** and **B** present different ideas about the importance of religion to Gao's rulers?
- 4 How useful are **Sources A** and **B** to a historian studying the importance of religion to Gao's rulers? Explain your answer using **Sources A** and **B** and your contextual knowledge.

## How does the Kingdom of Songhay challenge fifteenth-century European thinking about West Africa?

### GROUP 2.3

In the fifteenth century, people from Portugal, Italy and Spain in Southern Europe began travelling to the west coast of Africa where they met people with languages and cultures they did not understand. The accounts of their travels led Europeans to dismiss African peoples as 'savages', affecting the way Europeans viewed Africa and Africans for many years to come. So what was life really like for people living in the Kingdom of Songhay? What did fifteenth-century travellers from Southern Europe think about Africa? And what did they get wrong?

#### Objectives

- Describe the key features of life in the Kingdom of Songhay.
- Identify European ideas about Africa and Africans.
- Explain the ways in which the history of the Kingdom of Songhay challenges European ideas about Africa and Africans.

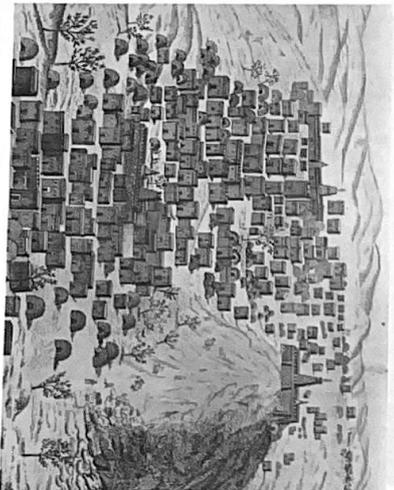
### 2.2A Life in the Kingdom of Songhay

The Kingdom of Songhay was home to thriving cities that rivalled many European cities at the time. It was also well organised and wealthy because of its role in international trading networks.

#### Timbuktu

During the fourteenth century, Mansa Musa transformed the city of Timbuktu from a small desert settlement into an important trading hub and a centre of learning in the Kingdom of Mali. By around 1450 it was home to 100,000 people, twice as many as London at that time, and it continued to flourish as part of the Kingdom of Songhay.

▼ **INTERPRETATION A** Timbuktu, drawn by a French explorer in 1828.



The city was at the centre of people's social life. Many houses were built of stone and there was a large public square where markets were held regularly. There was also at least one mosque: the Djinguereber Mosque built by Mansa Musa.

**Education**  
Under Askia Dawud, who ruled the Kingdom of Songhay from 1549 to 1582, Timbuktu had hundreds of Qur'anic schools (schools where the Qur'an, the holiest book in Islam, is studied). Sankore University also grew to 25,000 students, which is impressive when you think the city had only 100,000 inhabitants.

At Sankore University, students could study a wide range of subjects including history, geography, medicine, law, algebra, arithmetic, chemistry and astronomy. As a result, many people who studied at the university went on to have important jobs across the Kingdom of Songhay.

▼ **SOURCE B** A description of Sankore University by Muslim scholar Al-Ouazzan, later known as Leo Africanus. He was born in Spain and educated in Morocco but spent time in Timbuktu in 1513–1515. He wrote about his experiences travelling across Africa in *Description of Africa*, published in 1550.

[H]ere are great stores of doctors, judges, priests and other learned men that are... maintained at the King's costs and charges.

#### Connections

In the sixteenth century, Timbuktu was thriving just like many cities in Europe, including Florence.

Today, the city of Florence is part of Italy, but in the sixteenth century it was a city-state. This means it was a city that was run like a country with its own government. The growing number of wealthy merchants in Florence attracted thinkers and artists from far and wide to the city, because the merchants had the money to support their work. As a result, Florence became a European centre for new and developing ideas, just like Timbuktu.

#### Taxes and trade

The dias (rulers) of the Kingdom of Songhay needed money to maintain their wealthy lifestyles and finance the battles that expanded the kingdom. People who worked on the land paid taxes by giving a proportion of the crops they grew or the animals they raised to the government. Merchants also paid taxes: like the mansas of the Kingdom of Mali, the dias of the Kingdom of Songhay controlled trade routes by taxing caravans entering their land (caravans are groups of people and animals travelling together across the desert to trade).

The Kingdom of Songhay's trading network was very important to its survival and success. Gold was transported from Diene along the Niger River to Timbuktu. It was then sent across the Sahara Desert on camels, before being sold in Europe, Persia and China. The money from the gold was traded for many different things, including salt. Salt is valuable because it is used to preserve food, and it was particularly important in the Kingdom of Songhay because much of the food eaten in the kingdom was grown in Diene and had to be preserved so it could travel to where it was needed.

#### Key Word

caravan

#### Government

The Kingdom of Songhay was huge! To maintain control, the dias had to develop an organised system of government. So, they divided the kingdom into provinces (areas) governed by people who were loyal to them. The government was controlled from the city of Gao. Gao was the base for military leaders who could be sent to the provinces if there were signs of trouble. It was also where most of the taxes collected were sent. Like many of the government systems used in Europe at the same time, it was a highly efficient way of controlling a large area.

#### Culture

A large number of different groups of people lived alongside each other in the Kingdom of Songhay. For example, there were at least six different groups of people living in the city of Diene, all speaking different languages. Many of these groups converted to Islam. This brought some groups closer together, but many people mixed Islamic practices with other African religious practices and, as a result, the role Islam played in everyday life differed from one group to another. These groups included the Bambara, the Bobo, the Nono, the Bozo, the Fulani and the Songhay.

#### Over to You

- 1 a Choose four words that you think best describe life in the Kingdom of Songhay.  
b For each word, explain why you have chosen it. For example, you might choose the word 'diverse' and write: The Kingdom of Songhay was diverse because lots of different groups of people speaking different languages and practising religion differently lived alongside each other.
- 2 Prepare a presentation or a diagram to show what life was like in the Kingdom of Songhay. You must include details about at least two of the following:
  - education
  - government
  - taxes and trade
  - culture.

# What was so great about Askia the Great?

GROUP 2.4

Much of what we know about the Kingdom of Songhay comes from the writings of Muslim scholars and travellers. They have shaped our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the dias (rulers) of Songhay. We know that there were a number of strong dias, who expanded the kingdom and were in charge of organised systems of government. Yet, only one of them is nicknamed 'the Great': Askia the Great. Why are Muslim accounts of Songhay so important to our understanding of the kingdom? Why was Askia the Great celebrated by Muslim scholars and travellers? And why is Askia the Great's tomb a UNESCO World Heritage Site?

## 2.3A Muslim scholars and travellers in the Kingdom of Songhay

### Islam in West Africa

In the 630s, after the death of Muhammad, the founder of Islam, the religion spread to many parts of Africa and some African rulers converted to Islam. As the Kingdom of Gao grew and contact with the Middle East increased, the dias of Gao began to learn about Islam from Arab scholars. Dia Kossi converted to Islam and, from 1068, all dias had to be Muslim. However, some dias still practised African religions alongside Islam, and people in the countryside, towns and villages were not usually Muslims. Sonni Suleiman (who established the Kingdom of Songhay) and Sonni 'Alif (who expanded the Kingdom of Songhay) were both Muslim, but Sonni 'Alif particularly blended Islam with older African religious practices. For example, he fasted during Ramadan but he also made sacrifices to trees and stones.

As a result of the influence of Islam on West Africa, historians have many accounts of everyday life in Songhay and big events in the kingdom's history. These were written by Muslim scholars and travellers from North Africa and the Middle East, as well as by Muslim scholars who were born in the Kingdom of Songhay. We will look in detail at two different writers and how their personal experiences shaped their writing.

### Objectives

- Identify the role Muslim scholars and travellers play in our understanding of the Kingdom of Songhay's rulers.
- Analyse the reasons why Askia Mohammed became known as Askia the Great.
- Describe the legacy of Askia the Great.

### Fact

Oral history is history passed down from generation to generation through songs and the spoken word. It is a way for people to pass on their culture, beliefs, traditions and stories without writing things down. It is how centuries of history about the people of Songhay was preserved, until Muslim scholars and travellers started to visit and settle in the Kingdom of Songhay and write their own accounts in Arabic.

### Al-Maghili

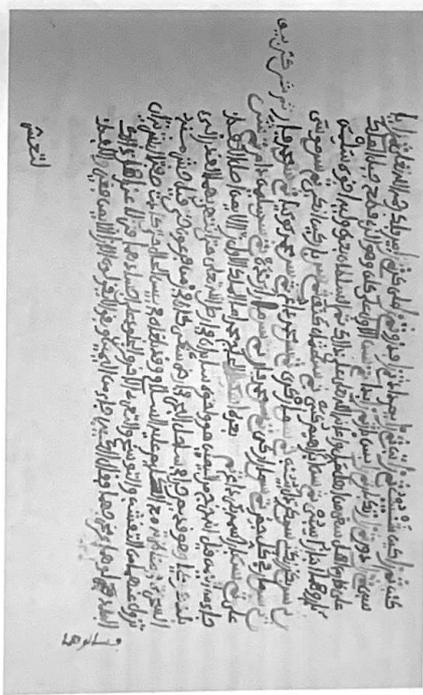
Al-Maghili was born in what is now Algeria in North Africa in 1425 and died in 1505. He was a Muslim. He travelled widely in West Africa, dedicating his life to spreading Islam and writing down his experiences. He was an expert in Islam and converted a number of West African rulers to the religion. He wrote about both Sonni 'Alif and Askia the Great.

Just like later European travellers, many Muslim travellers believed that their religion and culture were superior to the religions and cultures they came into contact with on their journeys. They tended to be very religious and were particularly critical of the widespread practice of mixing Islam with African religions. Many also believed that the achievements of the African kingdoms they visited were a result of their influence. Consequently, their accounts of people who were not strict Muslims are often inaccurate or negative.

### Al-Sa'di

Al-Sa'di was born in Andalusia in Spain in around 1569 and died in 1655. He was a Muslim. He spent much of his life living in Timbuktu and he wrote about his memories of the Kingdom of Songhay after it had been invaded by the Kingdom of Morocco. In his book *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* he wanted to record the history of the Kingdom of Songhay so that it did not disappear.

Al-Sa'di became the imam of Sankore Mosque in Timbuktu in 1626. An imam leads the prayers in a mosque and is an important religious leader in the community. Al-Sa'di's devotion can be seen in his writing, where he talks about Askia the Great as a 'righteous monarch and friend of Islam' and spends as much time talking about the religious scholars of Timbuktu as he does about the dias of the Kingdom of Songhay. This means historians have to cast the net wider still to get as full a picture of life in the Kingdom of Songhay as possible.



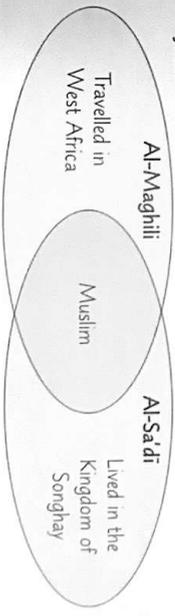
**SOURCE A** A photograph of a page from *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* by the imam al-Sa'di. The book was written in Arabic before 1655 although this edition was created later.

### Key Words

oral history    imam

### Over to You

1 Copy and complete the following Venn diagram to show the similarities and differences between al-Maghili and al-Sa'di and their accounts of the Kingdom of Songhay. Similarities should be placed in the overlapping section in the centre. An example has been done for you.



- Explain why historians need to be careful when using accounts written by Muslim travellers.
  - Explain why the accounts written by Muslim travellers are still useful to historians studying the Kingdom of Songhay and its dias.

## 2.3B The rise of Askia the Great

Muslim scholars and travellers have shaped our understanding of the Kingdom of Songhay. In fact, they have shaped our understanding to such an extent that, over 300 years after the fall of the Kingdom of Songhay, we refer to one of the kingdom's most successful dias as plain old Sonni 'Ali and another as Askia the Great. The key to grasping why Sonni 'Ali is not called Sonni the Great, and why this nickname was given to Askia Mohammed instead, lies in religion: the religion of the two dias and the religion of the people who wrote about them.

### Connections

Many rulers from different cultures have wanted to be known as great! For example, King Henry VIII of England, who ruled from 1509 to 1547, wanted to be known as Henry the Great. However, the Reformation caused more problems than he could ever have imagined. In contrast, Suleiman I, who ruled the Ottoman Empire (which covered much of the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe) from 1520 to 1566, was known as Suleiman the Magnificent. The nicknames rulers are given tells us a lot about what people at the time thought of them and how they have been remembered.

### Sonni 'Ali

Sonni 'Ali is remembered as a strong dia, who expanded the Kingdom of Songhay. However, during his reign there was constant tension between him and Muslim scholars and travellers. One of the reasons for this tension was that the Muslim scholars and travellers felt that Sonni 'Ali was not truly committed to Islam, because he continued to practise many aspects of other African religions.

**▼ SOURCE B** Al-Maghili was an Algerian Muslim who dedicated his life to spreading Islam. He travelled widely in West Africa during the reign of Sonni 'Ali.

[H]e used to worship idols, believe in the soothsayers' [pronouncements], seek help from magicians, and venerate [worship] certain trees and stones by slaughtering at them and by giving alms.

## GROUP 2.4

Muslim scholars in Timbuktu also never forgave Sonni 'Ali for the harsh treatment they received when he captured the city. Furthermore, they were angry that Sonni 'Ali placed close friends and members of his family in positions of power. This caused conflict on his death and meant that Sonni 'Ali's successor needed to work hard to bring peace to the kingdom.

Some historians argue that these tensions explain why Sonni 'Ali is not remembered as Sonni the Great.

### Askia the Great

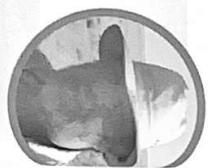
#### Military successes

Askia Mohammed was born in the Kingdom of Songhay in around 1443. Some historians believe he was Sonni 'Ali's nephew. We do know that from 1460 he served in Sonni 'Ali's army. In 1464, Sonni 'Ali became dia.

When Sonni 'Ali died in 1492, his son became dia for a short period of time before he was overthrown by Askia Mohammed at the Battle of Anfao in 1493. A new family – the Askias – now ruled the Kingdom of Songhay, and Askia Mohammed was a strong ruler who continued to expand the kingdom. He became known as Askia the Great.

### ▼ INTERPRETATION C

A description of Askia Mohammed, adapted from the book *Medieval Empires of West Africa*, by historian David Conrad, which was published in 2003.



As one of the greatest of the Songhay rulers, Askia Mohammed (c.1493–1529) strengthened and extended the kingdom that had begun to take shape under Sonni 'Ali. Askia Mohammed, who came to be known as Askia the Great, created a professional full-time army and built up the Songhay cavalry. He expanded Songhay control far beyond the territories of the old Kingdom of Gao.

However, Askia the Great did not get his nickname because of his military victories; previous dias, including Sonni 'Ali, had also expanded the Kingdom of Songhay in this way. What made Askia the Great different was his commitment to Islam. This healed the rift between the dias and the Muslim scholars and travellers, and they looked upon him positively as a result.

### Commitment to Islam

Askia Mohammed performed Hajj in 1496. Hajj is a pilgrimage to Makkah that all Muslims must complete once in their lives, if they are physically able to and can afford it. On his return, he wrote to an expert in Islam, al-Maghili, and asked him seven questions about how to rule the Kingdom of Songhay in a way that was consistent with Islam. Al-Maghili told Askia Mohammed that he must consult the Islamic scholars living in the kingdom when making decisions.

Askia Mohammed followed this advice and the Muslim scholars in the cities of Timbuktu and Gao gained significant control over the government of Songhay as a result. So it's hardly surprising that they later looked favourably on Askia Mohammed and started referring to him as Askia the Great.

**▼ SOURCE D** A photograph of the last page of the 42-page manuscript containing al-Maghili's answers to Askia Mohammed's seven questions.



### Key Words

Reformation Hajj



**▼ INTERPRETATION E**  
Historian Toby Green writing in *Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the rise of the slave trade to the age of revolution*, which was published in 2019.

Askia Mohammed – a very orthodox follower of Islam – was saddened by the large numbers of diviners, astrologers and magicians [in the Kingdom of Songhay.]

### Over to You

- 1 a Who was Sonni 'Ali?  
b Write a paragraph explaining why Sonni 'Ali is not remembered as Sonni the Great. Use the following terms in your paragraph: Islam, scholars, tension.
- 2 a Who was Askia Mohammed?  
b Write a paragraph explaining why Askia Mohammed is remembered as Askia the Great. Use the following terms in your paragraph: Islam, scholars, tension.

### Interpretation analysis

- 1 Read **Interpretations C** and **E**. How does **Interpretation C** differ from **Interpretation E** about the reasons why Askia Mohammed has been remembered as Askia the Great?
- 2 Which interpretation – **Interpretation C** or **Interpretation E** – gives the more convincing opinion about why Askia Mohammed has been remembered as Askia the Great?
- 3 How convincing is **Interpretation C** about the reasons why Askia Mohammed has been remembered as Askia the Great?

What was so great about Askia the Great?

## 2.1C The fall of the Kingdom of Songhay

## GROUP 2.5

## A divided kingdom

The Kingdom of Songhay became the largest kingdom yet seen in West Africa as a result of Sonni 'Alī's military victories. He was an incredibly successful conqueror. However, he did receive criticism. The scholars of Timbuktu were committed Muslims and they did not like the way Sonni 'Alī mixed Islam with African religious practices. They were, therefore, very pleased that the dias that followed Sonni 'Alī were more dedicated to Islam.

Shortly after Sonni 'Alī died in 1492, a new family called the Askias came to power. Askia Mohammed, who ruled from 1493 to 1528, was initially a strong ruler and is often called 'Askia the Great'. He was able to hold the kingdom together at the beginning of his reign. However, by the early 1500s, civil war had broken out. The Kingdom of Songhay was at war with itself.

The civil war only ended when Askia Ishaq II came to the throne in 1588, but permanent damage had been done to the Kingdom of Songhay.

## A weakened Songhay

As civil war raged in the Kingdom of Songhay, surrounding kingdoms noticed that Songhay was no longer as strong as it had been under Sonni 'Alī and Askia the Great. The Moroccan leader Mūlāy Ahmad was particularly eager to limit Songhay's power so that he could grow his own kingdom.

In 1590, Mūlāy Ahmad wrote to Askia Ishaq II as part of a dispute over taxes to be paid on trade in the areas that lay between the Kingdom of Songhay and the Kingdom of Morocco. Askia Ishaq II was infuriated by the letter and refused all of Mūlāy Ahmad's requests. Mūlāy Ahmad took this an opportunity to attack the much-weakened Kingdom of Songhay.



▲ **SOURCE F** A modern photograph of a sixteenth-century musket, similar to the ones used at the Battle of Tondibi. The use of muskets by the Moroccans was one of the first known uses of gunpowder weapons by an African leader.

## The Moroccan attack

Spies working for Mūlāy Ahmad had been living in the city of Gao for some time. From their reports, Mūlāy Ahmad knew that the Kingdom of Songhay would provide him with many workers and a lot of wealth.

The man chosen to lead Mūlāy Ahmad's army was called Judar Pasha, a Spanish man who had converted to Islam. Mūlāy Ahmad's strong connections with the Spanish and Portuguese would help him defeat the Kingdom of Songhay. The Moroccan army contained over 4,000 soldiers and many of them were armed with muskets and canons bought from Spanish and Portuguese traders. The use of gunpowder weapons placed the Moroccans at a huge advantage.

The battle between the two kingdoms took place on 11 March 1591 at Tondibi, just north of the city of Gao. The Moroccan soldiers approached Askia Ishaq II's army and were completely outnumbered. However, as the battle began, Judar Pasha's men began to fire cannons and muskets. The sound alone scared many of Songhay's horses. It soon became clear that the Songhay army could not defend itself against the Moroccan weapons.

## Meanwhile...

1588

As the Spanish supplied weapons to the Kingdom of Morocco, they were also going to war themselves. In 1588, the Spanish Armada was launched. Its aim was to invade England and take the throne from Queen Elizabeth I. In an unexpected turn of events, the Spanish were defeated and forced to retreat to Spain.

▼ **INTERPRETATION G** Writing in the seventeenth century, al-Sa'di describes the Battle of Tondibi between the Kingdom of Songhay and the Kingdom of Morocco in 1591.

They broke the army of the askia in the twinkling of an eye... at the moment of their defeat, the soldiers threw their shields on the ground and sat on them cross-legged until [the] army came and killed them in cold blood where they were, for it was their custom not to flee when defeated.

The Moroccans defeated the Songhay and, over the next few years, the Kingdom of Songhay was absorbed into the growing Kingdom of Morocco. Askia Ishaq II kept his title, but he had no power because the land he once ruled had been conquered. The largest kingdom West Africa had ever seen was no more.

## Another version of the story...

Some historians have put forward another version of the story of the Moroccan invasion of the Kingdom of Songhay, as told by Timbuktu chroniclers. Chroniclers are people who write accounts of important events or everyday life.

▼ **INTERPRETATION H** An extract from a book called *Empires of Medieval West Africa*, written by historian David Conrad in 2005.

It is claimed that some time in 1589, a slave born in the Songhay royal house named Wuld Kirinfil was imprisoned at Taghaza, in the Sahara. The slave escaped and fled to Marrakesh (in Morocco), where he claimed to be a brother of Askia Ishaq II. Wuld Kirinfil supposedly wrote a letter to the Moroccan sultan, Mūlāy Ahmad (r. 1578–1603), encouraging him to invade Songhay. Mūlāy Ahmad wrote to Askia Ishaq II demanding, among other things, payment of one mithqal [4.25 grams] of tax on every camel load of salt to leave the mines of Taghaza, which was in disputed territory halfway between Songhay and Morocco. Askia Ishaq II sent an insulting reply accompanied by a spear and a pair of iron sandals. The sandals meant that until such time as Mūlāy Ahmad could wear out those sandals, Askia Ishaq II would never agree to his demands... Mūlāy Ahmad used Askia Ishaq II's challenge as an excuse to send an expedition to attack Songhay.



## Key Words

civil war

## Over to You

- 1 a Who was Mūlāy Ahmad?  
b Give one reason why Mūlāy Ahmad wanted to conquer the Kingdom of Songhay.
- 2 Write a short account explaining how Mūlāy Ahmad defeated the Kingdom of Songhay. Make sure you use the following in your answer:
  - Judar Pasha
  - cannons and muskets
  - 13 March 1591
  - Tondibi
- 3 Look at **Interpretation H**.
  - a Summarise Wuld Kirinfil's alleged role in the Moroccan invasion of the Kingdom of Songhay.
  - b Why are historians unsure about whether they should include Wuld Kirinfil in an account of the Moroccan invasion of the Kingdom of Songhay?