Overview

It is a historical fact that descendants of West Africans make up large and important segments of the population in the United States, Brazil, the Caribbean, and Latin America. It is important that students in these places, especially the United States came to realize that they were not just descendants of slaves, but also were descendants of once great and flourishing kingdoms (Empires) in West Africa. The first of these great empires in West Africa was the ancient Empires of Ghana, after Ghana came the Empire of Mali and after that the Songhai Empire. There are many other empire and aristocratic kingdoms in West African savanna, like the Kanem-Bornu Empire, the Oyo Empire, the Benin Empire, the Asante kingdom, the Hausa city states etc. However, we will focus on the first three great empires.

Ancient Ghana Empire

The geographical location of the ancient Ghana Empire should not be confused with the modern nation state of Ghana. The ancient Ghana Empire lay in the Sahel between the Senegal and Niger River where it was created by the Soninke Negroes, members of the Mande language group.

The empire of ancient Ghana was the first of the great empires of the savanna area. It began about 1,500 years ago and it lasted for at least 1,000 years, between the periods of 790 AD to 850 AD it was a very great empire.

The capital of this ancient Ghana Empire was called Kumbi Saleh; it was a big and bustling city. It was divided into two parts, in one part lived the king a West African. In the other section of the city lived Arab Muslim traders from North African. The market in Kumbi Saleh at that time was the busiest in West Africa. Within the market, gold dust was used for the purchase of salt, cattle, sheep, wheat, raisins, dried fruits, ivory etc. In front of the market stalls sat ironsmiths who made weapons for the king’s army; goldsmiths and coppersmiths could be seen making jewelry; there were cloth weavers, potters and sandal makers; there were also leather tanners and craftsmen. It
is believed that famous Moroccan leather goods actually originated from the ancient Ghana Empire.

King Tankaminen was the greatest king of ancient Ghana Empire: A historian Arab trader (Al-Bakri) described the palace of king Tankaminen. Al-Bakri stated that the king had over 200,000 warriors armed with bows and arrows and iron-pointed spears. His palace was guarded by huge dogs' wearing gold and silver collars, and his servants carried shields and swords with golden handles. The king and his advisers wore elaborate and intricate weave clothes adored with fine jewels.

As was indicated earlier the ancient Ghana Empire was flourished for almost 1,000 years, however it fell (just like every empire that has ever existed or that is existing will fall eventually). The Ghana Empire was conquered Ibn Yasin, a muslim leader from the tribe of Almoravids. In AD 1076 one of Yasin’s genrral Abu Bakr, attacked Ghana with a great army of Almoravids and Berber horsemen, and captured the capital of Kumbi Saleh. Subsequently, the ancient Ghana Empire was never as powerful again and by AD 1250 it had become part of the new empire of Mali.

**Ancient Mali Empire**

As a result of the Amoravids conquering the empire of Ancient Ghana, the region was destabilized. The small kingdoms within the old empire sort and became independent again, and because there was no longer a strong emperor to control them, they fought one another. Mali began as a small Malinke kingdom around the upper areas of the Niger River. After the fall of Ghana Empire the state of Susu (one of the people group in the Niger River region) tried to rule many of the others. Sumanguru, the greatest of the Susu rulers, tried to establish an empire, but was unsuccessful.

The small kingdom of Kangaba was one of the states under Sumanguru’s rule. The life of the kingdom depended on the safety of the main caravan routes, which trader traveled. Under Sumanguru’s rule the routers were no longer safe and peaceful. In 1234 AD the people of Kangaba revolted against the Susu ruler, led by Sundiata Keita. As a small boy Sundiata had been sick and lame, but he learnt to use his legs and grew to be a very brave hunter and fighter, he returned from exile lead the Kangaba army. He marched against Sumanguru and beat him at the battle of Kirini in 1235 AD.

Sundiata Keite as founding king of the beginning Mali Empire; built up a vast empire that stretched eventually from the Atlantic coast south of the Senegal River to Gao on the east of the middle Niger bend adding what remained of the former empire of Ancient Ghana. He moved his capital to Niani on the Niger and he ruled his empire for twenty five years. Unlike the people of the older kingdom of Ghana, who had only camels, horses, and donkeys for transport, the people of Mali also used the river Niger. Via the river, they could transport bulk goods and larger loads
much more easily than by land. The Niger River enabled the kingdom of Mali to develop a far more stable economy than Ghana had enjoyed and contributed to the rise of the Mali Empire.

At the death of Sundiata in 1255 AD, his successor carried on his work. The greatest of these was Mansa Kankan Musa (generally called Mansa Musa). He became the emperor of Mali in about 1312 AD and in the next twenty-five years Mali grew into one of the largest empires in the world. He extended the boundaries in almost every direction, the Mali Empire controlled the gold fields of Bumbuk and Bure and the great cities of Timbuktu, Jenne, and Gao on the Niger River and extended to the salt mines of Taghaza. Many different peoples were thus brought in to what became a federation of states, dominated by Mansa Musa and the Malinke people. Mansa Musa was an exceptionally wise and efficient ruler. He divided the empire into provinces, each with its own governor, and towns that were administered by a mochrif or mayor.

Mansa Musa was a Muslim and he made Islam the official religion of the Mali Empire. Muslim teachers and traders from North Africa were welcome to live and prosper in Mali. Mansa Musa made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 AD. Thousands of nobles and slaves went with him and eighty camels carried gold worth over a million pounds. It is stated by various historians that when Mansa Musa passed through Cairo he gave so much gold away to the people that the value of gold fell throughout Egypt. Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage was remembered for a long time in Egypt and Mecca.

Mali was recognized as on the great empires of the world. The Emperor of Mali was advised by educated ministers and the capital was visited by great scholars from Egypt and North Africa. Many of these learned men settled in Timbuktu, around the 12th century, the University of Timbuktu had an attendance of 25,000 students in a city which had a population of 100,000 people. The students came from all corners of the African continent in search of excellence in knowledge and trade.

However, after Mansa Musa death, the emperors who followed him were weak and they could not control the small states. Many of these sorts to secede and many become independent by breaking away from the empire. The Songhai people from Gao, gained independence and made themselves stronger as Mali grew weaker. When the Mali Empire came to an end Songhai rose to be the largest and strongest of all the West African Empires. By the middle of the sixteenth century the Mali Empire had ceased to exist.

**Ancient Songhai Empire**

After Ghana and Mali Empires, the Songhai Empire was the third and great medieval power that ruled the central Sudan (the Arabic expression for West Africa) during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Gabibi were a West African tribe who founded the Songhai dynasty. Later the Dia
tribe of Berber nomads invaded and conquered the Songhai dynasty and established the Za or Dia dynasty.

However, the Dia dynasty soon gave way to the Sonni dynasty, preceding the ascension of Sulaiman-Mar, who gained independence for their city Gao. Sulaiman-Mar is often credited with wrestling power away from the Mali Empire and gaining independence for the small Songhai kingdom at the time. The Songhai people made Gao their capital and began an imperial expansion of their own throughout the western Sahel and by 1420, Songhai was strong enough to exact tribute from Masina.

Sunni Ali became the first great king of Songhai in about 1464. He was the great general who wanted to make his country rich and important, reigning as king from about 1464 to 1493. Like the Mali kings before him, Ali was a Muslim. In the late 1460s, he conquered many of the Songhai's neighboring states, including what remained of the Mali Empire. Sunni Ali expanded the Songhai Empire in term of landmass, that it is historically considered the largest empire that Africa has ever seen.

When Sunni Ali died in 1492 one of his generals called Muhammed became Emperor. He was such a skillful king that he became known as Askia the Great. He ruled Songhai for over 30 years. Askia Muhammed was a good soldier and during his reign many new towns and small states were brought under the government of Songhai at Gao. He also encouraged the scholars so that learned men came thousands of miles to teach and write books at Jenne and Timbuktu.

At the core of the Songhai Empire were the great cities of Gao, Timbuktu, and Jenne. Gao, was the capital and was a major terminus for the great caravans crossing the Sahara. Timbuktu was the great intellectual nucleus of West Africa (with its great University of Sankore). The Sankore University in Timbuktu developed a reputation for scholarship in rhetoric, logic, Islamic law, grammar, astronomy, history, and geography. And Jenne was a vital commercial hub as well as an important learning center.

Askia Muhammed was a devote Muslim, he was well known in Egypt, Morocco and Arabia, on his visit to Mecca in 1495 he devoted himself to scholastic pursuit in the area of government structure. On his return he became to make new laws and to improve the government of Songhai. He set up special offices to deal with different matters such as the use of the country’s money, the law and farming. He also made people pay their taxes properly and improved trade by making weights and measures the same all over Songhai. Because of this, and because traders were safe from armed bandits and corrupt officials, trade became easy and the wealth of the empire became greater. Muhammed’s achievement resulted to the Sahrif of Mecca (the head of the Muslim religion) making him the Kalif of the Western Sudan.

After Askia Mihammed the Great died, in 1538 his sons fought over the wealth of the empire and neglected in building the army thereby threatening its preparedness. As such Sultan Moulay of Morocco, with desire to capture the wealth of the empire sent an army all the way across the
desert. Judar, a skilled warrior lead the army of 2000 horsemen and 2000 foot soldiers armed with arquebuses (a gun-like weapon, which was advance more than any other weapon at that time). In 1591 at the great battle Tondibi, Judar defeated the current king of Songhai Empire (Issihak II). Songhai then became a part of the Moroccan Empire and her strength was broken.

**Activities**

**Present Day Geographical Identification of the Ancient Empires**
In order for students to identify with historical facts of these ancient empires, the teacher should divide the class into groups. Each group should work together to pin point the approximate land area or region that these ancient empires (Ghana, Mali and Songhai) rule over at the zenith of their influence. These identified regions should then be related to the present land area of some of the countries that presently occupy the sub-region of the West part of Africa.

*Resources: African History text books, Encyclopedia, Atlas, Maps, and internet computer stations. (see Appendix A)*

**Making Historical Analysis: Through Independent Research**
Students also working in group of two or three should make critical historical analysis for the factors that were responsible for the rise of these ancient empires and subsequently factors there were responsible for the fall of the ancient empires. These factors should be discussed in context of the political structure, economic structure and the social structure of these ancient empires.

*Resources: African History text books, Encyclopedia, and internet computer stations.*

**Identification of Key Characters (Kings)**
Students will examine the dynamics of characters, specifically the kings of each of the ancient empires the role they played the establishment of these great ancient empires. Why are some of the kings of these ancient empires considered as the greatest of all the kings in the founding of the various empires?

*Resources: African History text books, Encyclopedia, and internet computer stations.*

**African Museums Visit**
Students in the history class should be organized to take a field trip to a nearby museum that highlight the authentic information on African and African American history. This field trip will give the students the opportunity to develop a lifelong passion for the arts and cultures of Africa and African American. After the museum visit students will be expected address the class in educational information session; describing their interest, and lesson learnt during the field trip.

*Resources: Bus, note pads, cameras*
Comparative Essay: How do we know that Africa has a History?
Students will articulate and write a two to three page comparative essay, making the argument on how we can know for sure that most of the present written history of medieval African empires; kingdoms are authentic and can be verified anthropological finding, Arab Islamic scholars and oral history.

Resources: Computer access, internet access, anthropological finding and resources in museums

Appendix

A. Map of Africa’s Kingdoms and Empires
Bibliography


http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mali_Empire

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghana_Empire

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Songhai_Empire