



Key words

- Dynasty – A sequence of rulers from one family.
- Qur'an – The central religious text of Islam.
- Hadith – A collection of sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.
- Sharia law – A legal system based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith.
- Madrasas – Islamic schools that attracted scholars from all over the world.
- Pilgrimage – A journey to a spiritual place.

The emergence of Askia Muhammad

- Askia Muhammad was born around 1443 in Gao. He was originally known as Muhammad Ture but adopted the title 'Askia' when he became the ruler of the Songhai Empire.
- Askia Muhammad attended an Islamic school, where he studied the Qur'an.
- He had a successful career as a general in the Songhai army under Sonni Ali.
- After Sonni Ali died in 1492, his son, Sonni Baru, became leader.
- Sonni Baru was inexperienced and lacked support, particularly from Muslim scholars.
- Recognising an opportunity, Askia Muhammad assembled an army and defeated Sonni Baru at the Battle of Anfoa in April 1493, declaring himself ruler.

Pilgrimage

- In 1496–97, Askia Muhammad undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca to demonstrate his commitment to Islam and gain the respect of other Muslim rulers.
- He travelled with 500 horsemen and 1,000 foot soldiers.
- During the journey, he met Islamic scholars, learning about Islam, and brought back books from the Islamic world.
- He returned with the title 'Caliph of the Sudan', showing his leadership in West Africa's Muslim world.

Askia Muhammad's promotion of Islamic education and Sharia law

- Islam became the official religion of the Songhai Empire, with Arabic serving as the primary language for education and government.
- Askia Muhammad promoted Islamic practices, encouraging charity, daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and undertaking the Hajj pilgrimage.
- He supported Islamic education by establishing madrasas, where subjects such as the Qur'an, the Hadith, and Islamic law were taught.
- The University of Sankore in Timbuktu became one of the most renowned centres of learning, attracting scholars from across Africa and beyond.
- People came from all over the empire to study religion, law, astronomy, and literature at these institutions.
- The Songhai Empire also established links with Islamic learning centres in North Africa and the Middle East.
- Education was key in spreading Sharia law, which guided the daily lives of people.
- Askia Muhammad appointed Qadis (Islamic judges) in all the major cities such as Timbuktu, Djenné and Gao to ensure Sharia law was implemented across the empire.
- This improved relationships with other Muslim countries.

The Songhai Empire during the rule of Askia Muhammad

- Gao was the capital and political centre of the Songhai Empire.
- Timbuktu and Djenné were major cultural and trade hubs.
- Some historians describe Askia Muhammad's expansion as jihads (holy wars), while others say he aimed to strengthen the Empire.
- Northward expansion: Salt from Taghaza was traded for gold along the trans-Saharan routes.
- Westward expansion: Helped control trade routes, increasing wealth through taxes on merchants.
- Southward expansion: Brought food and trading goods into the Empire.
- Eastward expansion: Secured control of desert trade routes.

Developments in Songhai military organisation

- Askia Muhammad established a trained and disciplined standing army that could respond quickly to threats.
- The imperial bodyguard consisted of 3,000 men.
- He implemented a clear military structure, appointing generals and admirals to lead different forces.
- This organisation improved communication and made coordinated attacks more efficient.
- The Empire was divided into provinces, each overseen by a military leader responsible for maintaining law and order.
- Askia Muhammad continued the use of war canoes, introduced by Sonni Ali, to enable rapid movement, patrol trade routes, and protect the Empire's waterways.

Political and administrative reform

- Askia Muhammad divided the Songhai Empire into smaller provinces that were easier to govern.
- Each province was overseen by a trusted official responsible for managing local affairs.
- He reorganised the tax system to ensure the Empire had enough money.
- Tax funds were invested in infrastructure, such as bridges and public buildings.
- Central records were maintained to track financial and legal matters for future reference.
- The army safeguarded trade routes, ensuring uninterrupted and secure trade.
- Askia Muhammad established ministries to oversee key areas of the Empire.
- These ministries included finance, justice, agriculture, water, forests, and the Tuareg and Berber tribes.
- Each ministry was led by a minister who made decisions and reported directly to Askia Muhammad.

