



### Key words

- Social organisation: The way that society is structured.
- Social class: Grouped by class depending on who your parents were, your work and your education.
- Social mobility: Being able to move upwards from one social class to another.
- Ruling elite: The people in charge of a country.
- Polygamy: Having more than one partner.
- Griot: A storyteller who passed down oral histories.
- Scarification: Making marks and scars on the skin.
- Kora, ngoni, dundun and balafon: Types of musical instruments.

### The social organisation of the Songhai people

- People were divided into groups (social classes) depending on who their parents were, their work and education.
- The decision makers were at the top of the class structure and slaves at the bottom.
- The ruling elite were in charge with lots of power, this included the king (Askia), royal family, regional governors, local chiefs and military generals.
- Underneath the ruling elite were the nobility and government officials, including religious leaders and judges.
- Then came ordinary people such as farmers and fishermen, who were seen as less important.
- Slaves were at the very bottom of the class structure.

### Music and dance

- Griots used music to share stories.
- Music was used to praise the king in the royal court.
- Traditional music was used at social events and celebrations, for example, marriage.
- People would dance to music, helping to tell the stories.
- People would pretend to be animals, stamp their feet and act out battles, often standing in a circle, taking turns to go into the middle.
- They played traditional instruments including the kora, ngoni, dundun and balafon.

### Women in the Songhai Empire

- Women mostly followed a traditional role, so they were expected to marry and have children.
- They oversaw household duties including cooking, cleaning and childcare.
- Some wealthy men had more than one wife, which is called polygamy.
- Some women worked in the fields to help plant, look after and harvest crops such as rice.
- Some women were skilled at weaving and pottery making.
- In local markets, some women worked as traders, selling food or items that they made.
- Women of the royal family could act as advisers.
- Under Sharia (Islamic) Law, women could divorce under certain circumstances, inherit property and manage property.
- Despite this, women did not hold any real positions of power.

### Clothing and body art

- Clothing was made from traditional materials such as silk and leather.
- Men wore a boubou which was a long robe with sleeves.
- The more money a man had, the more decorations there would be on his boubou.
- Trousers were worn underneath the boubou and many men wore turbans.
- Women wore a pagne, which was a large piece of cloth wrapped around their body with a headscarf or veil.
- Beads, necklaces and earrings were worn by both men and women.
- Jewellery was made out of gold, silver or cowrie shells to show wealth.
- The Songhai people used different types of body art to express themselves, including scarification and tattoos.
- Henna was used for temporary body painting on the hands, arms and feet.

### Storytelling

- Storytelling was very important to the Songhai people.
- Stories would be passed from person to person through generations but many have been lost over time.
- Griots learnt stories and shared them with people.
- Stories about heroes, warriors and people from history were popular.
- Griots would often play a kora to accompany their stories.

### Special events and festivals

- The Songhai people celebrated Islamic festivals, for example, Eid al-Fitr.
- There were celebrations focused on the rulers of the empire.
- When a new Askia was crowned, there would be a huge celebration with dances, music and prayers.
- At harvest time, there would often be celebrations to give thanks for the crops grown.
- The Gani Festival celebrated the Songhai people's identity.
- The Askia Festival celebrated the history and culture of the Songhai people, focusing on Askia Muhammad.
- During festivals there was singing, dancing and storytelling.

### Slavery

- Slavery helped the Songhai Empire to grow economically.
- People that were captured during war often became slaves.
- If a person could not pay a debt, they could be forced into slavery.
- Criminals could be forced to become slaves as a form of punishment.
- If a slave mother gave birth to a child, it would also be a slave.
- Slaves would be transported along trade routes to cities where they would be sold or traded.
- Slaves were used as manual labour, for example, in agriculture and mining.
- Some slaves were taken into the army as soldiers to help control the huge area that the Songhai Empire covered.
- Slaves moved from one part of the empire to another, taking ideas, languages and religion with them and allowing cultural exchange.
- Rich people wanted slaves in order to show their wealth.