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## **Editorial Note**

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**LEGACIES OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN THE  
EMPIRE OF SONGHAI (1375-1591): LESSONS FOR  
THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN STATE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Nigeria is today, no doubt, bedevilled by many problems. Its social, political and economic affairs are all in serious crises and even threatening the very foundation of the state itself. Corruption is rampant as never before, banditry and kidnappings have gone to the wire, educational pursuit is at its knees, election rigging and malpractices are like never before. In fact one can rightly say that nothing works in the country. This paper went down the lane of

history for solutions and found the case of Songhai Empire. Sourcing and examining documents from books and journals, it discovered the zeal and commitment of the empire's founders and the strategies, plans and policies in economy, good governance, peaceful coexistence, creation of vibrant and effective military and reforms in educational system in building a prosperous and vibrant society. The paper at the end posited that Nigeria, as bedeviled with many problems, as it is presently, could take advantage of careful understudy of the ancient Empire of Songhai and learn how it reached its development firmly within a century.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Songhai, Good Governance, Lessons, Contemporary, Legacies

## **Introduction**

After years of independence, Nigeria is still stuck in the mud of incompetent leadership whose trademark is characterized by nepotism, corruption, tribalism and religious bigotry that have resulted in political instabilities, religious cum tribal conflicts, and incessant kidnaps and killings amongst many others. To say the least, nothing is working rightly in the country. But this is no surprise. Indeed most analysts think that poor governance in

Nigeria particularly from 1970s has increasingly resulted in various developmental crises associated with dismal performances at the level of creative and productive economic activities. (Sule Bello, 2010). The problem had been accentuated, not by a lack of resources but essentially as a failure of Nigerian governance structures, institutions and their operations. (Adeyere, 2010).

Since independence, Nigeria has experimented different style of governments. The country has operated parliamentary and presidential systems. In between, the military has staged in periodically 'to correct the messes' of the civilian administrations. But military intervention had more often than not resulted in more notorious abuses of values of governance and administration. In fact, with military in power the country experienced disastrous political turmoil and economic quagmire (S.Y.B.Kura2010).

The military was dislodged from power in 1999 with the return of civilian democratic government. This, appears, as a mere change



of guards as the only difference is the sheer presence of democratic institutions and structures, which were designed and used as conducts to siphon the riches of the country and render it bankrupt (Amali & Jekayinfa, 2013).

After two decades of democratization, Nigeria should show some evidence of progress. But so far none of the institutions of a democratic process is indicating any evidence of progress. However, what has become rife is an increase in ethno-religious conflicts, banditry, Boko Haram, IPOB and lots more.

This paper attempt to study the history of the ancient empire of Songhai, especially its various institutions in a renewed effort geared towards adopting its framework as a yardstick towards solving our problems today. Our assertion here is that Songhai's government had fundamental principles which addresses Nigeria's plurality, sharp and antagonistic intra-ethnic and religious relations as well as a system of economic management that would not only address Nigeria's rising poverty profile, but also

transform the socio-economic riches of the Nation.

### **The Great Songhai Empire**

The evolution of the Songhai kingdom which was referred to in Arab records as Al-kawkaw is obscure (Onwubiko,1990). However, according to some legends, the kingdom had its origin in Dendi area in the lower bend of the river Niger, South of Gao (EAbiola,1984).Its aborigines comprised two distinct groups, the Sorko, who were skilled fishermen, and Gow, or Gabibi, who were professional farmers and hunters and lived in villages of the riverine plains(Onwubiko,1990). By the seventh century or thereabout, the Sorko fishermen established their supremacy over the farming population, the Gabibi, and brought into being the Songhai Kingdom with its capital at Kukia (Paul 1979).

However in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, a nomadic Berber tribe, called Lemtuna or lemta, from the north, led by their chieftain Za Aliamen conquered the Songhai Kingdom and established a dynasty, with Za Aliamen as the first on the throne with the title of

the Za of Songhai. The Berber invaders intermarried with the indigenous people which favoured their easy absorption into the Songhai society. They also acquired the physical features, customs and language of the Songhai people (Osae and Odusi, 1980). The conversion of Za Kossai, the 15<sup>th</sup> king of the Za dynasty, along with many of the ruling class to Islam in 1010 inspired a remarkable achievement in the History of Songhai which culminated in the movement of Songhai capital from Kukia to Gao, which at that time had become a famous commercial centre linking the caravan routes of the Sudan with North African States as well as with the important Markets of Tadmekket and Takedda. This action of Za Kossi was motivated by his desire to take advantage of the strategic commercial position of Gao.( Roland & Atmore, 1972).

The Songhai Empire was involved fully in the trans-Saharan trade, as well as in agriculture and fishing(Abiola,1984). Over time, Gao grew strong and became prosperous to the extent that by the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it was already attracting the attention of the Mali Empire which would finally dominate Gao in 1325

under Mansa Musa. But in 1335 Ali Kolen and Sulayman Nar who were taken as hostages at the court of Mali during Mansa Musa's raid escaped back to Gao (Ajayi & Crowther, 1965). Ali Kolen was proclaimed King and took the title of "Sonni", meaning liberator, after he had driven out the Malian garrison in Gao. This marked the end of the Za dynasty and its replacement with the Sonni title. Under the rule of the Sonni Kings, the kingdom of Gao continued to grow in wealth and size as the Mali empire gradually declined. Gao however did not regain its full independence from Mali until during the reign of Sonni Ali the great (1464 – 1492), the founder of the Songhai empire (Bolanle, 1965).

Sonni Ali's ascension to the throne of the Songhai Kingdom of Gao or Al-Kawkaw, as it was also called, was of very great significance as it marked the transformation of a small kingdom into the largest empire that ever existed in the Billad Al Sudan before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sonni Ali known as Sonni Ali Ber, (meaning the great) was the real founder of the Songhai Empire who considered himself an empire builder and took measures to realize his life

ambition. He first repositioned the military forces by establishing a formidable regular army with a strong cavalry force mounted on horses. He **also** built up a powerful navy of war canoes for the speedy transportation of soldiers and war materials. With the strong army and navy, he embarked on a career of consolidation, conquest and expansion. After ensuring the strong security of his newly independent state, he, thus, turned to conquest, beginning with Timbukku, then Jenne, (a great centre of trade and Muslim education) which fell under him in 1473, after a long siege. Sonni Ali also turned to the South, where he campaigned against the powerful Mossi kingdom of Yatenga. Next, the wild tribes of the Hombori Mountains were conquered and their territory was annexed to his empire (Anene, 1966). He then pushed eastwards and conquered people up to the Hausa state of Kebbi (Hunwick, 1975); the Fulani of Masina were also subdued (Akin, 1975).

In 1480, Sonni Ali began the construction of a large canal to Walata, but died when he got drowned in 1492, while waging war against the Fulani of Gurma. However until his death, he had

converted the petty kingdom of Gao into a vast empire stretching from Jenne in the west to Kebbi in Hausa land in the east and from Timbukku in the north to the borders of the Mossi kingdom to the south(Honwick,1971).

Among Sonni Ali's measures to maintain the vast empire he had created by his conquest was adopting a suitable system of government where he offered provincial administration that inspired the division of the empire into provinces and each of which a governor responsible to the emperor was appointed. In the troublesome border provinces, distinguished generals were appointed as governors. In provinces where people proved willing to submit to his rule, local rulers were allowed to stay in power provided they remained loyal and paid regular tribute to the emperor. The army and navy were considered important instruments for the effective maintenance of loyalty and people in the provinces and for guarding the frontiers of the empire against external foes (Hunwick, 1975).

Sonni Ali was succeeded by his son Bakari Da'a (Sonni Dao or Baru), Sonni Da'a strong attachment to Songhai traditional religion precipitated a Muslim revolt against him. The revolt was led by Muhammad Toure, a devout Muslim who emerged victorious. When the daughters of Sonni Da'a heard that their father was deposed, they exclaimed in frustration “a si kyi a” meaning "he shall not be” (Onwubiko, 1982). But the victorious Toure, in derisive defiance, took “Askia” as his title which would be inherited by his successors. This ended the Sonni dynasty in 1493 and the rise of the Askia dynasty of Songhai (Onwubiko 1982).

Muhammad Ibn Abubakar Toure, who is popularly known as Askia Muhammad the Great, was the most celebrated and brilliant ruler in Songhai History. The Songhai Empire attained its golden age during his thirty-five years reign. He contributed immensely to the growth and fame of the Songhai Empire among which was the expansion of the empire. He undertook a series of military campaigns against Mossi in the south in 1498. Even though he fell

to conquer Mossi, he weakened their military strength and restricted them to the region of what is today Upper Volta or Burkina Faso (Bolante, 1965).

Askiya the Great then turned westwards in 1499 and captured much of what remained of old Mali. He set off eastwards in 1513 and subdued the Hausa states of Gobir, Katsina, Zaria and Kano (Hunwick, 1975). By the end of his reign in 1528, he had considerably increased the empire which stretched from Kano in the east to the borders of Tekrur near the Atlantic in the west and from the northern fringes of Mossi kingdoms in the south to Taghaza in the Sahara Desert, in the north. Finally, Songhai became the largest empire that ever existed in the Sudan before the nineteenth century.

To strengthen the empire, he ensured good governance by enforcing strict compliance to justice based on Qur'anic law or *Shariah*. Trustworthy people were employed as judges to interpret the law and dispense justice throughout the provinces of the



empire. The most notable among the judges was Muhammad Al-Migili who was also a prominent scholar in the empire. These developments resulted in a number of reforms and the introduction of a kind of a social revolution. In this context, veiling was made compulsory for women which drastically reduced social vices in the empire. Collective morality was expressed in such terms as equality, justice, fairness, brotherhood. Equally, mercy, compassion, solidarity and freedom were achieved through the strict adherence to *Shari'ah* during the time of Askia Muhammad the Great. All these, no doubt, and to a large extent ensured the rapid development of the empire (J.F. Ade Ajayi & I. Espie 1966). Askia the Great also reformed the military and ensured their strength by creating a standing army always ready for service.

But perhaps one of the bedrocks of Askia Mohammed Great in organizing the Songhai Empire was in the realm of Islamic education. This received a tremendous impetus during his reign. He ensured the upgrading of Sankore Mosque to become the medieval Sankore University, renowned for Islamic education.

Greater attention was also paid into teaching and learning in the empire and encourage education at all levels. A large number of schools were built in the great cities of the empire like Timbuktu, which alone had many as one hundred and fifty schools (J.F.Ade Ajayi 1966).Askia also brought scholars from abroad when he returns from Mecca; among them is Al-Maghili who authored the famous work, *The Obligations of Princes*. More so the Sankore University also yielded positive results where many distinguished scholars were produced, among whom were Muhammad Kati, the author of the well-known *Tarikh Al fatash*; and Abdurrahman As Sadi who also wrote *Tarikh Al Sudan*.These two great works have served as the pioneer works for the history of Songhai (J.C.Anene1966).The impact of Askia Muhammad in education on the religious, social, cultural and political life of the people Songhai was far reaching and never surpassed.

Askiya the Great strengthened the economy of the Songhai Empire to meet the huge cost of maintaining his imperial administration and his large standing army. To this end, he encouraged agriculture

by producing food crops like maize, cassava, cocoyam, and fruits especially bananas and legumes then the other region produce Palm products. Domestic livestock such as cattle, goats, cows and poultry and hunting this were made in Timbuktu. In area of industry many centres of iron smelting were established. The Indigenous architecture included like skills of masonry and carpentry, sculptures in the media of clay was undertaken in the empire with serious note and trade which was the main source of imperial revenue was greatly pursued (C.C.Ifemesia 1965).

In Agriculture, he introduced a system by which the empire was divided into regions, each specializing in the production of a special type of food crop for which it was naturally best suited. Industries or crafts were encouraged on a similar basis as agriculture. Some regions specialized in smiting (making arrows, and spears for army) others for gold-mining, production of salt, or copper or building materials and the rest. The same measures were also carried through to trade, by encouraging both import and export trade. Askia Muhammad's economic reforms paid off as the

measures increased prosperity. This enabled him to maintain a stable, viable and peaceful empire during his reign.

Askiya the Great was deposed by his son Musa in 1528 who succeeded him as Askia Musa but was however assassinated by his cousin Bankore who succeeded him as Askia Muhammad II in 1533. Askia Muhammad II was also dethroned as a result of successful revolution against him by Ismail one of the sons of great Askia Muhammad in 1537. Ismail reigned for only two years from 1537 – 1539, but during this time, he brought his father Askia Muhammad the great back home from exile to the comforts of the imperial palace where he passed away in 1538.

The empire began to fall apart and Ismail spent his time suppressing revolts by subjects. Later, Askia Ishaq I ascended the throne and reigned between 1539 and 1549 and was succeeded by Askia Daud who spent thirty-three years on the throne from 1549 to 1582. With the death of Daud began the internecine wars of succession that undermined much of his good works. In a period of

nine years after him (1582 – 1591), three Askia ruled Songhai; Aski Muhammed III (1582 – 1586) Askia Ishaq II (1588 – 1591). It was during the reign of the last that the Songhai Empire collapsed under the Moroccan invasion of 1591. (Isichei, 1977).

### **The Features and Major Characteristics of the Great Songhai Empire**

The geographical position of Gao kingdom of Songhai gave it a superb advantage which was an impetus to an imperial status. Situated in Savannah region and along the most fertile stretch of the Niger basin, it was naturally well endowed, with an abundant variety of food crops, cattle and fish. This made possible the support of a large population and growth of the old cities of Kukia and Gao from which the empire eventually developed. With abundant food and a large population, the creation of large, strong and standing army became possible (Hunwick, 1966). Songhai's location was also an important link as the navigable waterway gave its rulers added advantage of easy mobility of troops which remained the key factor to the rise of the empire. It also favoured

agricultural production, wealth creation and easy movement of goods and service that geared import and export trade in the area. Gao, the former capital, became the terminus of the caravan traders (Kilson, 1968).

Having gone through all these details, this paper will now proceed to look at certain areas of achievements recorded in the great Songhai Empire, majorly on how the empire was able to consolidate its political, economic and social developments. This is provided for a better understanding of what is to follow the last section.

Sonni Ali transformed the petty kingdom of Gao into a empire, and the conquest of Timbukku in 1468 marked the beginning of this transformation to an empire. He then consolidated his hold on the area before manoeuvring his way round the Niger bend to capture the rich city of Jenne. Several times he had defeated the Mossi who raided the empire from the south. The Sonni Ali campaign did not stop there but had engulfed the region eastwards along the Niger as

far as Hausa state of Kebbi. Remarkably, Sonni Ali applied an effective system of government for the rapidly growing empire by dividing the empire into provinces to be effectively controlled by existing leaders in peaceful areas, but by the army, generals were in troublesome areas (Biko, 1982).

The greatest of the kings of the Songhai Empire, Askia Muhammad Toure also embarked on the same process to consolidate the empire and spread of Islam. He first created a strong army with which he greatly widened the empire, having expanded his campaign to the pagan Mandigo and Fulani in the West, the Toure Berbers of Taghaza and Agades now Niger republic and the Hausa of Katsina and Kano in the east in present Nigeria. As a result of his conquest, the empire reached its greatest extent stretching from Hausa land to the Atlantic and into the desert as far as Taghaza in the present northern Mali (Thatcher, 1974). One of the Askia's remarkable achievements in consolidating the empire was the genius of his administrative ability which was reflected in the enlightened organization and manning of the great

empire. The effort of these two mentioned leaders made Songhai become the largest empire in west Sudan before it was lost to Moroccans in 1591 (Paul, 1979).

Political factor was also vital in the rise of Songhai. The personal qualities of its rulers, notably Sonni Ali and Askia Muhammad were supremely important. The former laid foundation of the empire through his conquest and adopting a system of provincial administration where the empire was divided into provinces and governors appointed with special consideration of the prevailing situation in certain areas. He also made the army and navy to be important instruments for the maintenance of loyalty and peace in the provinces, while guarding the frontiers of the empire against external foes (Ajayi 1975). The second ruler Askia Muhammad continued the consolidation of these conquests by further expansion of the imperial frontiers. It was to his inimitable genius that he also created central and regional government.

The central administration was created as a council of ministers



and each was in charge of a department of a state. Most notable among the ministers were the ministers in charge of finance and taxation (Fare Mundy), justice (Asari Mundy), immigration (Koreg Farma), defence and chief naval officer (Hi-Koy), forestry (Sao-Farma) rivers, lakes and fisheries (Hari-Farma), property matters (Warrey Farma) traditional religion (Kari-Farma) and others. These helped Askia Muhammad greatly in achieving effective leadership. The regional administration was also divided into four sub-kingdoms or regions namely, Kurmina, Bala Bangu and Dendi. Each was administered by a regional governor while the Askia exercised considerable authority and close supervision. Far off states like Kano and Katsina only paid tribute as vassal states. The empire ensured there was strict enforcement of justice-oriented along the Qur'anic law or Shariah. Reputable Scholars like Al-maghili were made judges to interpret laws and dispense justice in the provinces of the empire. They were offered a permanent appointment, gifts, land and other incentive as a shield against corruption and to ensure fair dispensation of justice.

The empire also carried out constant army reforms. Law and order was enforced through strict control of local government by at the centre. Their system of administration provided the basis of unity in an empire with a heterogeneous society of people with diverse cultures and traditions (Morris, 1966).

The reform and strengthened economy of Songhai Empire by its rulers greatly contributed to the boost of its unprecedented forward thrust. The adoption of the Islamic religion strengthened the commercial links between the Songhai empire and north Africa. Thus the Muslim revival which characterized Askia the Great reign gave a stimulus to foreign trade which boosted the economy of the empire. The introduction of a system of weight and measures, market inspection, banking and credit, agricultural reform, proper utilization of navigable waters, and fisheries no doubt owed their origin to the empire's contact with the Muslim world of North Africa. Besides, with tributes from the vassal state, tolls and customs duties from the trans-Saharan trade routes the cities of Timbuktu and Gao flourished, becoming rich commercial

cities and leading centres in the entire Songhai empire (Onwubiko, 1982).

No doubt, the greatest contribution of Islam to the greatness of the Songhai Empire was in the promotion of Muslim culture. Under the Askias, Islamic learning received great impetus and made Timbuktu become the Athens of the Sudan as an intellectual centre. There, Islamic theology, law, rhetoric, grammar and Arabic literature were taught. Islam was used as a unifying force and the basis of culture in the Songhai Empire (Abiola, 1984). Islamic religion brought to the empire the priceless heritage of writing in Arabic, and by means of which the grandeur that was Songhai has been preserved for us (Onwubiko, 1999). Similarly, Islam brought with it other aspects of Muslim culture such as Oriental customs of dress and manners. This greatly contributed for the promotion of religious culture in Songhai.

### **Lessons to Derive from Songhai's Achievement**

As mentioned above, the personnel qualities of Songhai rulers

made it possible for it to excel. In Nigeria and West Africa, in general, the quality of good leadership remains unprecedented, but the so-called failed states and leaders that we observe today in Nigeria and West Africa can be characterized by their regency, veracity and corruption. They exhibit inherent incapability and sovereign subservience towards leading their countries, qualities that sap the national will and subvert self-reliance, unity, respect for the rule of law and creativity so vital to any genuine process of development. On the contrary, the coherent and vehement leaders of i.e, Sonni Ali and Askia Muhammad the Great, Songhai remained focused on the empire's consolidation. This, if replicated in Nigeria and west Africa can be a boost to rapid development despite the diversification of regions and tribes.

The consolidation process of Songhai can be attributed to the zeal and commitment of its leaders to establish a large and strong empire in west Africa and if a leaf of the zealous effort could be borrowed by the Nigerian leaders, the disunity and chaos in the nation would be universally addressed and managed.

Politically, the fortunes of any country are a function of the quality of its leadership. When a patriotic person is on the throne, good things including unity happen. With the benefit of hindsight, looking at the performance of Songhai, leaders we can judge that the trouble with Nigeria is the failure of leadership. Nigeria must therefore copy from Songhai leaders who had vision for their empire; leaders who led by deeds, not by words; achievers, not deceivers. Nigeria needs a leadership that will not only have its footprints on the sand of time but which also by dint of hard work, fair play, dedication and commitment, will remain forever in the hearts of Nigerians (Achebe 1983).

Leadership is not everything, but it is an extremely important factor. Unless Nigeria produces leaders with ability, integrity, commitment and vision, it cannot succeed at nation-building and attaining unity. It is gratifying to note however, that within the judiciary, the legislature and the executive, the issue of quality of leadership shall receive great attention. Nigeria must not relent on this struggle for quality leadership as it is the key to build the

country and bring it back on the path of unity and development as was done in Songhai Empire (Awolalu, 1976).

The strengthened effort and good policy to reform the economy of Songhai empire is worthy of emulation by Nigeria despite the fact that in Nigeria corruption remains endemic to an extent that any Nigerian that serves in any government position and retires with numerous houses in great cities of Abuja, Lagos, Kano and other mega cities will be welcomed with chieftaincy titles by his people. But where he did not, he would be rejected by his people as a misfit. Little wonders, therefore, that despite Nigeria's abundant endowment in human and material resources, the country has not matched these with commensurate achievement in both human and capital development indices. Regrettably, corruption remains the greatest challenge to national development, unity and nation building. Songhai rulers used agriculture, industry and population to boost their economy (Coleman, 1958). But Nigeria remains stagnant despite its vast natural and human resources. With poverty becoming endemic, insecurity has resulted as a significant

fall out of the neglect of effective and efficient leadership, a high rate of unemployment, illiteracy and violent ideology that promotes disunity, creates chaos and escalates tension and discomfort. If Nigeria will transplant Songhai's policy on the economy, it will free the country from the grip of anger, tension, unemployment, insecurity and disunity. There will be an assiduous effort at a truly national development.

Songhai achieved a lot in terms of educational and cultural development. Askia Muhammad's effort to revitalize education and promote Islamic culture yielded positive results to the empire. Education is of paramount importance as it improves lives, reduces deviant tendencies and brings about the integration of people as well as empowers them. But education is in shambles in Nigeria despite its being the gateway to the development of any nation.

As was done in Songhai, learning centres were upgraded to Universities and foreign scholars were employed to realize the intention. The contrary obtains in Nigeria where most of its public

institutions of higher learning such as universities, polytechnics and colleges of education, which research out-put could greatly facilitate well investigated and considered the solution to many of the country's problems, tend to exist mainly for the award of certificates rather than the generation of important innovative and relevant ideas in decision making at all level. The same also applies to the neglect of establishing specialized research institutions in the field of industries, agriculture, technology, science, Arts, health, human development, employment and a host of others as was practiced in Songhai (Enebe, 2009).

Songhai rulers also used religion to solve their differences. In Nigeria, however, the pluralistic nature as well as the seemingly incompatibility of the diverse ethnic and religious groups have enmeshed the country in cataclysmic ethno-religious conflicts that have nullified any attempt at achieving national unity and development.



## **Conclusion**

History is replete with knowledge of the past that holds the enormous solution to some of the present-day problems. A lot can be learned from the history of Songhai rulers and how they changed the fortune of Songhai Empire by their vision and practical solution to issues of national interest and development. The Songhai example could provide a clue to the Nigerian leadership on how to transform the Nigerian state politically and economically. The Songhai rulers achieved this fit simply by providing quality and visionary leadership to their people; they enhanced the scope of popular and patriotic participation in governance as a vital springboard to the achievement of their national objectives.

Can Nigeria learn anything of benefit from the Songhai's experience? The present rather lukewarm approach to the activities of national associations and institutions is a far cry from the great effort at development as exemplified by the Songhai

rulers. Higher institutions of learning, specialized research centres and other types of resource establishment as well as administrative structures, and the research capabilities need to be facilitated to assume more purposive, visible, capable and proactive functions. For sure this will greatly enhance the country's capacity to become focused as well as engage competent hands in the articulation of its national goals towards finding a lasting solution to its national compounded problems. But, Nigeria today is a typical example of the saying that what we learn of history is that men do not learn from the lessons of history. This is an irony.

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