

History

Senegal and Gambia are young nations, formed in the wake of the independence movements that swept through Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet those few decades are a mere blip in a past that spans centuries, during which illustrious African emperors charged on horseback through the lands of the Sahel, marking territories and fighting over souls. People moved and settled, united and dispersed with the currents of time, adopting new faiths or defiantly strengthening old ones. Their unwritten stories shaped the shifting cultural grounds that still determine life today.

EARLY RESIDENTS

In a large circle spanning today's Gambia, parts of Senegal's east and the mangrove-dotted western coast, a scattering of ancient sites tease researchers and provoke speculation about this area's earliest citizens. Near the banks of the Gambia River, large rings of smoothly hewn laterite stones guard the secrets of the sophisticated early civilisation that built them, probably around AD 750. It is almost certain that these enigmatic monuments indicate burial sites, just like the fascinating seashell tumuli found in Senegal's Siné-Saloum region (see the boxed text, p26).

More is known about the gradual development of trade routes in the 1st millennium AD, linking West Africa to the north of the Sahara. The desert had long been too big an obstacle to brave, until someone had the simple but brilliant idea of using camels to transport gold and salt across these hostile lands. The caravans traced early economic arteries, along which settlements were founded that grew first into wealthy trading stations, then powerful federations.

AGE OF THE EMPIRES

The first state to grow rich from the lucrative trade routes was the Empire of Ghana. At its height between the 8th and 11th centuries, it spanned large parts of eastern Senegal and western Mali, and probably would have continued to expand happily, had the trade routes that built it not also opened the path for the forces that destroyed it. Around 1075, the legendary Almoravid dynasty rode in from the north, eager to spread Islam and, naturally, extend its territories

THE GAMBIA

The Gambia's official name always includes 'The', but this is often omitted in everyday situations. In this book we have usually omitted 'The' for reasons of clarity and to ensure smooth-flowing text.

TIMELINE

AD 750

Stone circles, such as those of Wassu and Kerr Batch, and seashell burial mounds, such as Diorom Boumag near Toubakouta, indicate that sophisticated civilisations inhabited this region in a time that we still know very little about.

1030s

The Halpulaar (Tukulor) leaders of the Tekrur Empire in northern Senegal convert to Islam. Their religious and economic rivalry with the Ghana Empire makes them natural allies of the Almoravids in their war against Ghana.

1324

Mansa Kankan Musa, the 10th emperor of the mighty Mali Empire, causes the first global financial crisis when he carries so much gold with him on his pilgrimage to Mecca that he crashes the global markets.

BURIED IN OYSTERS

Giant baobabs cling with mighty roots to the tiny island of Diorom Boumag near Toubakouta. Baobabs love calcium-rich soils, and that's why they flourish on this unusual island. Diorom Boumag is in fact a human-made mound, shaped entirely from the shells of oysters and mussels, thrown here on a massive pile many centuries ago. There are more than 200 such sites across the Siné-Saloum region in Senegal, and around 20 stand out for another reason. Excavations have uncovered human bones among the shells, dating back to around AD 730–1370 and suggesting that the shell dumps were also used as burial sites. Little is known about the people who shaped these fascinating islands, but they provide fascinating proof of early habitation of this part of West Africa.

southwards. Ghana put up a fight, but eventually succumbed to the combined forces of the Almoravids and the northern Senegalese Tekkur Empire.

From the 11th century onwards, West African history brims with stories of horseback warriors, passionate preachers and insatiable emperors. Most famous of all is Soundiata Keïta, whose praise songs are still today on the lips of every Manding *griot* (West African praise singer). This hero of epic proportions led wars, conquered peoples, defeated the sorcerer king Soumaoro Kanté and built the greatest West African kingdom of all – the Mali Empire. By the 14th century this mighty realm stretched from the Atlantic coast across to present-day Nigeria, spreading its wealth, hierarchical social make-up and Manding culture across the region.

In a far-flung corner of the kingdom (the territories of present-day Gambia and Guinea-Bissau), one of Soundiata's generals, Timakhan Traoré, set up an outpost of the empire, the small state of Kaabu, where he could reign and gain fame. Today, the founder-general has largely been forgotten, eclipsed by the awe-inspiring persona of Janke Waali, the dreadlocked animist king who fought Kaabu's last battle in 1867 against Muslim Fula pushing in from the south.

The Empire of Mali itself saw numerous rulers come and go. Few are remembered today. What remains, though, is the story of a realm that rose to dazzling greatness before stretching too far, breaking in the process. By the mid-15th century Mali had begun to wane, and a new contender for greatness, the Songhai Empire, rose in its place.

In the far west, Mali's decline turned its former vassal state, the Jolof Empire, into a self-governing realm. For Jolof, however, the waning of central control came at a difficult time. An influx of Portuguese trading wealth had reinforced divisions between the empire's individual member states that proved impossible to resolve. Thus weakened, Jolof was no match for the rebellious spirit of Koli Tenguella, who waged war against its northern states and snatched them to his newly formed Fouta Toro Empire on the Senegal River. Jolof crumbled and by 1600 had to be content with the status of a microstate that co-existed with its former components.

1360

The Wolof people establish the Jolof Empire, uniting the small coastal kingdoms Siné and Saloum and the northern Waalo, Kayor and Baol in a visionary federal state whose cultural legacy remains strong to this day.

1443

Portuguese ships reach the mouth of the Senegal River, and a year later they land on the coast of Senegal at a peninsula they name Cabo Verde, meaning Green Cape. (It is now called Cap Vert, and is the site of Dakar.)

1537

As the Mali Empire declines, the former outpost of Kaabu becomes a kingdom in its own right. It eventually falls in a series of fierce battles between the animist Mandinka rulers and Muslim Fula forces.