

Gold The True Motor Of West African History: An Overview Of The Importance Of Gold In West Africa And Its Relations With The Wider World



Slave Trade

While the prime sources of gold remained more or less where they had always been, hidden from the outside world, along the headwaters of the Rivers Senegal and Niger (Wright 2007: 21).

Towards a Longer Time Frame for African History

Slavery and African slaves have dominated historical perspectives of Africa and its relations with the wider world. Yet, it is gold which has been the most important and enduring element that has shaped and determined West Africa and its interactions with the wider world. For at least 1,500 years gold and not slaves has been the commodity determining not only the region's economy and history, but also West Africa's links with the wider world.

Beginning in the late 1700s, understandable humanitarian concerns and philanthropic motives ensured that the focal point within public discussion and history, when dealing with West Africa, came to be centred on the issue of slavery. Focussing on slavery to the detriment of gold and other commodities to some extent ensured that the export of slaves from West Africa came to be halted in the course of the nineteenth century. The persistence of slavery within Africa, as well as the continued smuggling of slaves out of Africa, in many instances

served to legitimate the intervention in, and subsequent occupation of, West Africa by Europe's imperial powers. Ironically, those opposed to colonial rule made grateful use of the historical trope of slavery that existed within European discourse to hasten the end of colonial occupation in West Africa. Thus the discourse that had in many instances been used to legitimate the establishment of colonial rule, was also used to oppose colonial rule. But, and this is the important issue, in both instances it was the trope of 'slavery' that determined the manner in which lay and professional observers looked at West Africa's past. In both instances it was a dehumanising and debilitating view of history that effectively robbed, and continues to rob, West African historical actors of any agency beyond being mere pawns in the West's insatiable thirst and desire for slaves. The persistence of this negative history continues to rob West Africa of its rightful place in global history.

The focus on slavery has overshadowed and driven from both public and scholarly perception the realisation that West Africa's history is far more than slavery alone; it is indeed a sad irony of history that the incessant focus on the dark past of slavery has managed to eclipse the bright history of gold in West Africa. A refocus of West African history, away from the past three hundred years to the longer perspective of nearly two thousand years, brings into focus a far more constructive and less passive history of West Africa and its inhabitants. Far from being merely the subject pawns of the deeply exploitative and dehumanising trade and economic systems initiated outside of Africa, a refocus on the role of West African gold in its relations with the wider world, brings to the fore a far more energetic and virile history in which West Africa's relations with the rest of the world are based on a far greater degree of equality and shared interest.

This essay has been written with the express purpose of drawing to the fore the long history of gold in West Africa so that a new beginning can be made to refocus views of Africa and its people away from a debilitating and ultimately nihilistic focus on slavery. A focus on the long-term history West African gold will bring to the fore an interesting history in which Africans are not merely acted upon but ultimately determined the course of global history and humanity as a whole.

My argument has been structured in such a way that it makes three principal points, all of which relate to the period prior to 1900. These three points are:

- Gold is widespread and accessible all across West Africa. That gold is to be

found across West Africa in such a manner that people can access it without resorting to forms of technology other than those that they would normally use in their existence as non-mechanised agriculturalists;

- Between 400 and 1500 West Africa was the world's most important supplier of gold;
- The central role of Mande speaking peoples and Mande forms of social structure in coming to an understanding of the exploitation of gold in West Africa.

Broadly speaking, apart from the three points listed above, the paper has been structured chronologically, from approximately 1000 BC to 1800 AD, and roughly geographically from North, on the northern fringes of the Sahara, to South-West to the southern fringes of the Sahara, before ending in the South-East in the forest zones of West Africa and the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. Travelling through time and space we will touch upon the people referred to as the Garamantes in the Libyan desert, the ancient states of Ghana and Mali in what is today the Sahel of West Africa, before concluding with the Akan/Ashante forest polities in present-day Ghana.

Agriculturalists' Gold

The gradual desiccation of the Sahara that began approximately 5,000 years ago served to concentrate human populations on the fringes of the desert. South of the Sahara agricultural communities came to be established around 1000 BC. For the past two thousand years members of these agricultural communities on the southern fringes of the Sahel have resorted to gold production for part of the year. Throughout the region 'placer' deposits have been prospected and mined for gold by agriculturalists during periods of the year in which the agricultural cycle came to a standstill.

Throughout West Africa gold mining has concentrated on placer deposits across a very large area with comparatively little reef mining. The mining of placer deposits has been possible with little technological investment, and was well within the reach of agricultural communities living in the areas concerned. As in the present, agriculturalists sought to supplement their income through searching for gold.

Instead, countless small gold workings across an extensive area of West Africa obscured the existence of a single well defined mine which people outside the area believed existed in the area. Instead, people outside of the area, who were ignorant of the extent of the extensive series of small scale agriculturalist gold

workings, believed that the alleged single source of the gold was being consciously hidden from them by the West African kingdoms that developed in the area. It was precisely because placer deposits were so widely spread, and were so accessible to agriculturalists, that West Africa was able to produce so very much gold.



The Garamantes

Garamantes

The Garamantes were Berber semi-pastoralists who lived almost directly south of what would become Carthage and controlled the trade going into and coming out of the Sahara from West Africa. The Garamantes are believed to have adopted horse-drawn chariots from Egypt in the late second millennium BC and riding horses in the first millennium BC (Ilfie 1995: 30). Rock art in the Sahara indicates that regular lines of communication were open to the sudanic belt from the Mediterranean via the Garamantes as early as 500 BC. The drawings, mainly of chariots or carts, some horse drawn and some bullock drawn, have allowed some to tentatively re-construct the trade routes that might have existed across the desert, and even to differentiate between routes.

Trade to and from West Africa was possible via wagon routes, yet with the ever further desiccation the Sahara became ever more of a boundary, eventually the Sahara became insurmountable for donkeys, horses and bullocks. Yet while it lasted the Garamantes controlled and determined the trade across the desert. Somewhat fancifully, Herodotus (n.d.) noted of the Garamantes:

Ten days' journey from Augila there is again a salt-hill and a spring; palms of the fruitful kind grow here abundantly, as they do also at the other salt-hills. This region is inhabited by a nation called the Garamantians, a very powerful people, who cover the salt with mould, and then sow their crops. From thence is the

shortest road to the Lutophagi, a journey of thirty days. In the Garamantian country are found the oxen which, as they graze, walk backwards. This they do because their horns curve outwards in front of their heads, so that it is not possible for them when grazing to move forwards, since in that case their horns would become fixed in the ground. Only herein do they differ from other oxen, and further in the thickness and hardness of their hides. The Garamantians have four-horse chariots, in which they chase the Troglodyte Ethiopians, who of all the nations whereof any account has reached our ears are by far the swiftest of foot. The Troglodytes feed on serpents, lizards, and other similar reptiles. Their language is unlike that of any other people; it sounds like the screeching of bats.

It has been suggested that the Garamantians traded directly with the Bambuk around the headwaters of the Senegal and Niger rivers, yet this is highly unlikely. None the less, the Phoenician settlement of Carthage, established due north of the Garamantians on the Mediterranean coast was famed for its gold, which may very well have come from West Africa via Garamantes.

It is probable that by the time of the destruction of Carthage in 146 BC trade across the Sahara had come to a standstill. It would be at least another five hundred years before any form of regular trade came to be established across the Sahara again. Not until the camel had been introduced from Arabia into North Africa by the Romans in around 100 AD would it be possible for people to regularly and reliably traverse the Sahara. From at least 400 AD onwards camel mounted Berber established trade routes across the Sahara to West Africa. The camel and the caravans it enabled came to dominate the trans-Saharan trade until the second half of the twentieth century.

The introduction of the camel allowed for constant communication to be maintained between the Berbers on both shores of the Sahara. With their camels these people bridged the desert, and carried an ever-growing trade, in which southbound salt was exchanged for northbound gold. There were four principal routes across the Sahara:

- *The Salima trail from Cyrenacia to Wadai;*
- *The Bilma Trail or Garamantes road from Tripoli to Kavar;*
- *The Gadames Road from Ghat to the Hausa country;*
- *The Sijilmasa - Walata Road from Morocco to the Middle Niger and Upper Senegal.*

Each of these routes represented a two month journey, with long waterless

stretches between oases. The most important of these routes, Sijilmasa to Walata, was founded on the gold of the Upper Niger that was exchanged for the salt of the Saharan oases of Tagaza and Taodeni.

It has to be borne in mind that when, following the introduction of the camel, the trans-Saharan trade routes were explored and established, the first Berber traders to reach the southern shores of the Sahel found an already long-established and extensive trading system within West Africa. That is, the trans-Saharan trade and outside influence did not initiate the initial establishment of West African trading systems or political units; instead the Berber allowed for the intermeshing of two previously wholly separate trading systems, that of the Mediterranean and that of West Africa. As Iliffe succinctly noted (1995: 81): *'The chief reason why trans-Saharan trade grew so swiftly in the early Islamic period was probably that it linked two flourishing regional economies.'*

For its part West Africa contributed gold to the new trading linkages and for the coming 1,100 years, until the European discovery of America, West Africa supplied the bulk of the known world's gold.

Sudanese States: Ghana and Mali

From around 400 AD a series of Sudanese states rose to ascendancy and eventual decline. Amongst the most well-known of these states are Ghana and Mali. Although historians refer to these states as kingdoms or empires, it has to be borne in mind that they have taken terms and concepts drawn from European history and transferred them onto an African reality which culturally and politically was different to Europe (see, for instance, Jansen 1996).

The medieval state of Ghana (not to be confused with present-day republic of Ghana) was established by Mande speaking people in the Hawd region around Kumbi Saleh in present-day southern Mauretania. It is remembered by the present-day Soninke as the state of Wagadu. Medieval Ghana's population developed iron working techniques and established a centre of authority which traded across the Sahara. Gold was mined to the south of the newly emergent polity at the headwaters of Niger and Senegal rivers in what has become known as the Bure and Bambuk goldfields respectively.

Traders and merchants from Ghana traded for gold from these mining areas by means of what has become known as *'silent trade'*, or dumb barter. Upon reaching the gold mining regions the Ghanaian traders would place their trade goods on the ground, then they would beat on large drums and blow on trumpets,

before withdrawing out of sight. The local Africans would then emerge and place what they believed to be the equivalent value in gold on the ground next to the goods they wished to trade for. The Africans would then withdraw, and the traders would re-emerge. If the traders agreed with the exchange rate being offered, they would take the gold and once again beat their drums and blow their trumpets before withdrawing with the trade being completed. The gold would then be taken to the market towns of Kumbi Saleh or Aoudaghost, the southern terminus of the western trans-Saharan trade route that led from Marrakesh in Morocco. In these towns the gold would be exchanged for salt and exotic Mediterranean goods transported across the Sahara by North African merchants. Through controlling the trade and taxing the import and export of goods transported to Ghana in exchange for gold the Ghanaian state was able to accrue wealth and strengthen its position.

As the west African Sudan and Sahel is largely bereft of salt, and salt was in short supply everywhere in the region, it '*was literally worth its weight in gold*' to Africans in West Africa at the time (Crowder 1977: 28). The oasis town of Taghaza, which was built completely from salt and was entirely dependent on food transported into the town from the North and the South depended solely on its production of salt.

When the Arabs conquered North Africa in the seventh century they discovered that Berber nomads on camels had long established trade links with Ghana, and that the main item of trade was gold. This was of particular importance to the Arabs for their monetary system was based on gold. For the coming eight hundred years, until the Americas were brought into direct contact with Europe and Asia, West Africa was to become the prime source of gold in Europe and the Levant. By the eighth century Ghana's fame as 'the land of Gold' had reached the court of the Caliph in Baghdad, where news of its existence was recorded by the geographer Al-Fazari (Crowder 1977: 27). According to the early tenth-century geographer Ibn al-Faqih, gold grew there '*in the sand, as carrots do, and is picked at sunrise*' (in Wright 2007: 19).

The Arab conquest of North Africa gave the trans-Saharan trade a new impetus by linking it with a vast empire, anxious to obtain as much as possible of its gold, on which the monetary system of the Muslim world depended. Traders from the eastern parts of the Muslim world, mainly from Iraq, were attracted to towns at the northern end of the trans-Saharan trails.

The Andalusian Spanish Arab traveller Abu Ubayd Al-Bakri visited the court of Tunku Menin, the reigning ruler of Ghana in the year 1065. Upon his return to Andalusia Al-Bakri wrote *The Book of Routes and Kingdoms* and noted that Ghana's ruler commanded an army of no less than 200,000 men, of whom 40,000 were bowmen. He levied taxes on imported salt and gold, thus for every donkey load of sold transported into Ghana he levied a tax of one dinar in gold. His subjects were permitted to sell gold dust, but all nuggets were the property of the ruler and remained under his control (Crowder 1977: 30). Al-Bakri (cited in Iliffe 1995: 51) wrote of the ruler of Ghana:

The king has a palace and a number of domed dwellings all surrounded with an enclosure like a city wall (...) The king adorns himself like a woman (with gold) round his neck and on his forearms, and he puts on a high cap decorated with gold and wrapped in a turban of fine cotton. He sits in audience or to hear grievances against officials in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses covered with gold-embroidered materials. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold, and on his right are the sons of the (subject) kings of his country wearing splendid garments and their hair plaited with gold.

The ruler of Ghana never fully embraced Islam but maintained good relations with Islamic traders from North Africa. The capital of Ghana, probably Kumbi Saleh, in Southern Mauritania was divided into two cities, one Islamic with twelve mosques and six miles away the royal capital with its own mosque but also the stronghold of traditional religion. The rise of the Almoravids, who would later occupy Spain, brought about an end to the traditional religion of Ghana and ended its dominance.

Across West Africa, the Soninke recall the collapse of Ghana with a legend about 'Wagadu' that brings to the fore the conflict that existed in medieval Ghana between Islam and the traditional religion of its leaders. A traditional religion that ensured the fertility of the goldfields upon which the state depended. Crowder & Ajayi summarize the legend as follows (1971: 125):

Wagadu was blessed with vast amounts of gold, replenished annually, thanks to the guardian of the kingdom, a snake. The snake was worshipped in an annual sacrifice of a virgin. Catastrophe came about when the lover of the virgin chosen to be sacrificed killed the snake. The dying snake pronounced a dreadful curse, causing the desiccation of the land and the cessation of the gold, which moved to

Bure on the Upper Niger. As a result the people dispersed and their country turned into desert.

Elizabeth Isichei (1997: 224) wrote of this tradition: *'It is an extraordinarily vivid symbolic representation of the decline of a kingdom, the advent of Islam, and the degeneration of the environment.'*

Ghana came to be established in the fourth century, essentially at that moment in time when North African Berber traders were able to effectively use the camel to cross the Sahara. Ghana developed its position through being positioned in such a way that it could control the flow of gold from both the Bure and Bambuk goldfields as it moved northwards to the terminus on the southern shore of the Sahara desert. Perfectly positioned to control the trade Ghana existed for approximately eight hundred years until it collapsed in the early 1200s.

Undoubtedly the most remarkable and well known history in West Africa is that of Sunjata, the *'Lion King'* (jata = 'lion'; 'Sun' is from Sogolon, his mother's name), and the society he founded, called 'Mali' or 'Mande'. All across the Sahel griots and hunters' bards continue to recount the trials and tribulations of Sunjata. Indeed, it has been argued that the political system that came about on account of Sunjata's activities continues to influence and determine social structure within Mande societies across West Africa (cf. Jansen 1996).



Mansa Musa

The epic of Sunjata notes that the history of Mali begins with Sunjata's defeat of the oppressive Soso blacksmith-king Sumaoro Kanté. Shortly there after Sunjata claimed and gained the allegiance of people from the headwaters of the Niger to the Sahara in the North and the Senegal in the West. Essentially the economy of Mali was based on the agriculture of its people, supplemented by profits gained from control and taxation of the trade in gold. Taxation was invested into an army of chain-mailed cavalry that extended the empire to the Atlantic. The early fourteenth century became the golden age of Mali; the empire came most

spectacularly to the attention of the world during the reign of Mansa Musa (1312-1337) the most famous of the Mali rulers. It was Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 that literally put Mali on the map. During his stay in Egypt on his way to Mecca he spent and gave away so much gold that there was a major devaluation of currency. The Catalan map of Abraham Cresques shows Mussa Melli seated on a golden throne, wearing a golden crown, and describes him as *'the richest and most noble king in all the land'* (quoted in Crowder 1977: 32).



Ibn Battuta

Shortly after the reign of Mansa Musa, the Arabic traveller Ibn Battuta, travelled to Mali in 1352. He provided first hand descriptions of the ruler of Mali as sitting on cushions of the finest silks, bedecked with expensive European cloth, with a golden crown and a parasol topped with a golden bird the size of a falcon, and being praised by a group of musicians as the most venerable descendant and successor of Sunjata (Ibn Battuta 1929: 326). Ibn Battuta's detailed reports provide also a first-hand account of the journey from the Mediterranean across the Sahara via the oasis Sijilmasa to Taghaza, the first town within the jurisdiction of the ruler of Mali. Not surprisingly, Ibn Battuta disliked Taghaza, a hot, smelly, fly-ridden city made of salt slabs with camel skin roofs and entirely bereft of any trees. All food had to be brought in from outside, dates from the north and millet from the south. People travelled from the south to collect salt; in the words of Ibn Battuta (1929: 318):

The negroes use salt as a medium of exchange, just as gold and silver is used (elsewhere); they cut it up into pieces and buy and sell with it. The business done at Tagházá, for all its meanness, amounts to an enormous figure in terms of hundredweights of gold-dust.

Travelling along the trade route that transferred gold from West Africa, Ibn Battuta provided posterity with not only a detailed itinerary but also a detailed description of the manner in which trade was conducted between the Mediterranean and West Africa.

The Asante Kingdom

The historian Ivor Wilks has convincingly demonstrated that it were smiths and traders from the Sahel, the area of the Sudanese states, who first discovered, developed and maintained the goldfields deep in the forests of present-day Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana (Wilks 1993: 1-39).

In the fifteenth century reports of the fabulous wealth of the ruler of Mali were known in Europe. Even before the completion of the '*Reconquista*' of the Iberian peninsula in 1492 European powers not only gained extensive insight into the Almoravid kingdoms they had destroyed in mainland Europe, but they also sought to gain direct access to the trade in gold from West Africa which had been used in part to fund the establishment of the Muslim province of Al-Andalus in the peninsula. To this end, beginning in the 1450s Portuguese caravels began progressing ever further down the West African coast. By the 1460s they had passed and named Sierra Leone ('Lion Mountains'), and by 1471 had established Elmina ('the mine') on the Gold Coast (the present-day republic of Ghana).

The Portuguese had been anxious to find the true source of the gold of West Africa, to this end they had rounded Sierra Leone and tacked up the coast to where Elmina came to be situated. When they first cast anchor off the coast of Ghana their hopes and aspirations appeared to have come about for they discovered coastal people who were prepared to trade in Gold and who used Malinke honorific titles to distinguish themselves. That is they had found people who were aware of 'Mali', and more importantly they had found, what appeared to be, another route to the gold of Mali that effectively bypassed the Sahara (Wilks 1993: 5).

The Portuguese began to import slaves from the kingdom of Benin - in present-day Nigeria - and the Congo to exchange in Elmina for gold, and at the beginning of the sixteenth century 'a yearly tally from 24,000 to 30,000 ounces' was being taken from Elmina to the treasury in Lisbon (Wilks 1993: 5). None the less, the Portuguese were aware of the fact that they were unable to compete sufficiently with the trade for gold from the forests northwards to the Sahel. The bulk of the forest gold travelled North through to Djenne on the Niger river, from where it

was transported to Timbuktu and onwards across the Sahara.

In the mid-sixteenth century, Mande horsemen founded the kingdom of Gonja centred on Bighu between the Black and the White Volta, pushing the Mossi kingdom of Dagomba eastwards to modern Yendi (Isichei 1997: 230). According to Arab records the ruler of Mali had dispatched an expedition to Bighu to complain that tribute in gold was not reaching him. Instead of returning the soldiers established a new state, married into the local community and adopted the language of the people, whilst remaining the ruling caste.



Asante - golden stool

The newly established Gonja state appears to have relied on raiding for slaves, which it then exchanged with Akan polities in the forest region in exchange for Gold. Of these forest polities, the kingdom of Asante would rise to ascendancy at the end of the seventeenth century. Asante, imported slaves to dig for gold, raided slaves from the north and later came to export both. In the mid eighteenth century Bighu, which had once been subject to Mali, became a tributary state to Asante (Wilks 1993: 1-39).

Conclusion

For more than 1,500 years gold has determined the political economy of West Africa and determined its relations with the outside world. The horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the plantations of the New World are not to be ignored. Yet it must not be forgotten that the trans-Atlantic slave trade lasted for a comparatively short period of time, approximately three hundred years. Furthermore, the bulk of literature dealing with the Slave Trade concentrates on what occurred outside of Africa, and when it does deal with Africa and its peoples, they are presented as victims duped and subjected to the will of calculating foreigners. Indeed, this sad nihilistic history obscures more than that it

illuminates, Africans are presented as victims robbed of agency. It is a history that hides the far longer and richer history of West African gold, the bulk of which, prior to the introduction of industrial technology in the early 1900s, was dug and mined by agriculturalists in those seasons of the year in which no work was needed on their fields. This West African gold powered the global economy centred on Europe and the Indian Ocean prior to the discovery of gold in the Americas. West African gold, dug by agriculturalists, underwrote the caliphates of North Africa, Arabia, Asia and Southern Europe following the Islamic conquest. The lure of West African gold powered the voyages of exploration emanating from the Iberian peninsula. From 1500 onwards West African gold would power the world system that came to be established and which would come to encompass the whole world. Underlying all of these momentous events were millions of agriculturalists who searched for gold when the agricultural cycle provided them with the time and the space to do so. Social forms and structures associated with the Mande speaking peoples of West Africa provided a template within which gold could be dealt with. A template that remained in existence and only came to be transgressed in the twentieth century with the introduction of highly financed industrial mining enterprises. For at least 1,500 years gold dug by West African agriculturalists has shaped global history, it is a history that outshines the dark nihilism of Africa's victimhood.

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