

The Empire of Ghana

OLLI 30219 - The Great West African Kingdoms

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Origins

-One of the earliest medieval kingdoms of West Africa

- **Time line:** From ~500CE until late 12th century,
- **Location:** Southern Mauritania and Western Mali
- **People of ancient Ghana were the Soninke.** Their dominance on their neighbors started with:
 - Superior Iron weaponry,
 - Acquisition of horses from North Africa
- Ghana which means “Warrior King/The Gold King”, is also known as Wagadu (meaning “land of herds”) in Soninke.



The Empire of Ghana

Ghana, the first of the three successive West African empires of the medieval age, spread north and east from Sénégal River. Ghana reached its height in the early 11th century.

The Epic of Wagadu (1)

Diabe Cissé and the Serpent Bida

1. The Epic of Wagadu

Narrated by Diarra Sylla and Jiri Silla

Diarra Sylla text recorded in 1977 in Yérééré, Mali, transcribed and translated into French by Mamadou Soumaré. Jiri Silla text recorded in 1965 in Yérééré by Malamine Cissé, transcribed and translated into French by Abdoulaye Bathily. Each published in separate mimeograph form by the SCOA Foundation for the 1977 Colloquium at Niamey, Niger. This excerpt edited and translated into English by Thomas A. Hale.

THESE EXCERPTS ARE FROM TWO NARRATIVES about the rise and fall of the Ghana Empire, known locally as Wagadu because the first city was the home of the Wago, one of the three main peoples who claim descent from the empire and the group that is most closely associated with its founding.

Although no one has published an epic that gives the full story of the Ghana empire, the following two excerpts from two different versions of shorter narratives, the first by Diarra Sylla, 257 lines, and the second from Jiri Silla, 800 lines, taken together, give the reader the outline of what happened to the people of Wagadu. These texts constitute a partial reconstruction of what must have been a somewhat longer epic about events nine centuries ago.

Because the excerpts from the 1977 texts presented here are divided into separately numbered chapters and come from two different sources, the line numbers do not follow sequentially. But the shift from the first narrator to the second will be indicated below.

The Epic of Wagadu (2)

Dinga Khoré ancestor of the Soninke clans

[Diarra Sylla first tells his listeners about Dinga Khoré, ancestor of the descendants of the Ghana empire. In this version, they came from India via Yemen and Israel to an unidentified place in Africa approximately 1,000 miles east of present-day Mauritania. Toward the end of his life, Dinga left a message for a vulture to convey to his descendants:]

75 . . . I have a message I would like to entrust to you.

The vulture replied, "We are at your service."

Dinga spoke again: "After my death, when all the sacrifices have been made, you will tell my descendants to go toward the West.

"There is a place there called Kumbi, there is a well at that place, and there is something in the well, people talk with that creature, for it is not an ordinary creature, they only settle down there after they have reached an understanding with the creature in question."

[The vulture transmitted the message to one of Dinga's sons, Djabé Cissé.]

Djabé Cissé asked, "How can one find this place? "

The Epic of Wagadu (3)

Diabe Cissé set out to find Kumbi Saleh

The vulture replied, "You will kill forty fillies for us, one a day.
125 "The lungs and the liver are for me, the vulture, and the remainder
of the meat you will give to the hyena "

[After the sacrifices were made, the vulture explained what the
descendants of Dinga would find at Kumbi.]

. . . after their arrival at Kumbi, they will find there a well and in-
side the well a monster.

15 They will be called upon to make a contract with this creature.

[Djabé Cissé and his people set off with the hyena and the vulture for
Kumbi.]

They walked for forty days before reaching Kumbi. At their arrival
the hyena stopped at the edge of a well and the vulture
perched at the top of a tree near the well.

20 The vulture said then to the children of Dinga, "Here is Kumbi,
here is the well."

Then a loud noise arose from the well.

The voice asked who was there, and the vulture replied that they
were the children of Dinga and that they had come to settle
there.

At these words, an enormous snake rose out of the well. He was
very black, he had a crest on his head like that of a rooster, and
the crest was very red.

He said, "No one will settle here."

The Epic of Wagadu (4)

Diabe Cissé entered a pact with the snake Bida

At these words, an enormous snake rose out of the well. He was very black, he had a crest on his head like that of a rooster, and the crest was very red.

He said, "No one will settle here."

25 Djabé replied, "We will settle here, for our father at the end of his life ordered us to come to Kumbi. And this is certainly Kumbi: here is the well! We shall settle here."

"Agreed!" said the snake called Bida. "But there are conditions for that."

Djabé declared then, "We are ready to listen to these conditions."

"Fine!" replied Bida.

"Each year," he said, "in the seventh month, on the seventh day of the seventh month, you will offer me 100 heifers, 100 fillies, and 100 girls."

30 "Agreed," said Djabé, "but each year, the loss of 100 heifers, 100 fillies, and 100 girls will amount to the ruin of the country."

They bargained and finally agreed on one filly and one girl—but the filly will be the best in the entire country and the girl the most beautiful in the entire country.

[Djabé won the title of King of Wagadu as the result of a competition to lift four heavy drums. The snake then gave him conditional power to rule.]

The Epic of Wagadu (5)

Wagadu prospered under the Cissé dynasty

47 When Djabé was installed as ruler, Bida declared to him that he would be supplied with people and goods as long as he honors the contract that linked them together.

[The Jiri Silla version follows from here on. When the time for the sacrifice came next year, the people prepared themselves.]

15 At the end of the rainy season, in the seventh month and on the seventh day, all the people gathered and the sacrifice was carried out.

The morning of the sacrifice, the morning of the solemn day, everyone turned up before the door of the ruler, drummers as well as citizens, all gathered in this spot.

18 As for the girl, she was already dressed, dressed in such an extraordinary way that you had to see it to appreciate it.

The filly was so fat that it was beyond commentary.

25 When they arrived near the well, the cortege divided in two.

The griots were always in front of the ruler, competing with each other in turn until they arrived at the edge of the well.

The Epic of Wagadu (6)

The snake's curse lead to the decline of Wagadu

28 Before the griots could return to the ruler with their songs, Bida the snake suddenly surged out of the well and made a terrifying loud noise.

[After coming out and going back into the well twice, the snake appeared again for a final time.]

30 He wrapped himself around the girl and the filly; he carried them into his lair.

The ruler and his people returned to the town.

[The snake kept his promise. Gold rained down on the country and the people prospered. But during the annual sacrifice to Bida another year, after the third appearance of the snake from the well, a man attacked it.]

690 Mahamadu the Taciturn cut off his head with his saber.

At the very moment his head fell away, the serpent cried out:

“Seven stars, seven luminous stars,

“Seven famines, seven great famines,

“Seven rainy seasons, seven entire rainy seasons,

“No rain will fall in the country of Wagadu.

695 “And even less gold.

“People will say that Mahamadu the Taciturn ruined Wagadu!”

Organization within the Empire (1)

-Similar to a federal state

- King “Kaya Magan” had absolute power,
- Provinces had governors representing the King,
- Empire was prosperous because of trade,
- Perfect location in the Sahel: enables control of commerce from the savannah to the forest in the south AND the commerce from the Sahara and Maghrib.
- A sophisticated trade tax system was in place, the Soninke were in control of:
 - The regional trade: exchange of salt, copper, dates from the Sahara
 - and trans-Saharan trade: slaves, livestock, kola nuts, gold etc...

Organization within the Empire (2)

-Similar to a federal state

- **Strong military force:** 200,000 men
- **Religion was mixed** from ~8th century: animism and islam (nobility mostly for business). Kumbi Saleh was divided in 2:
 - Muslim side,
 - Animists side where the « muslim » King lived,
- **Dynasties were matrilineal:** the custom was that it was the son of sister of the king who inherits the throne.

Decline

- Around mid 11th century the Soninke took control of the city of Awdaghust from the Berbers,
- **Conflicts with the Berbers** until the Almoravids (muslims berbers) took the city back and the control of trans-Saharan trade around 1054,
- **Ghana** retook the city back around 1100, but **never regained its previous glory**. The empire gradually lost its dominant position in the Sahel:
 - Lasting disturbances generated a new trade route avoiding Ghana opened around 1224.
- Deprived of its resources, **Ghana was replaced by the Sosso**, then annexed in ~1241 by the empire of Mali.

References

- Empires of Medieval West Africa *by David Conrad*