

# The Songhay Empire

**OLLI 30219 - The Great West African Kingdoms**

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# Origins

## *-The Kingdom of Gao*

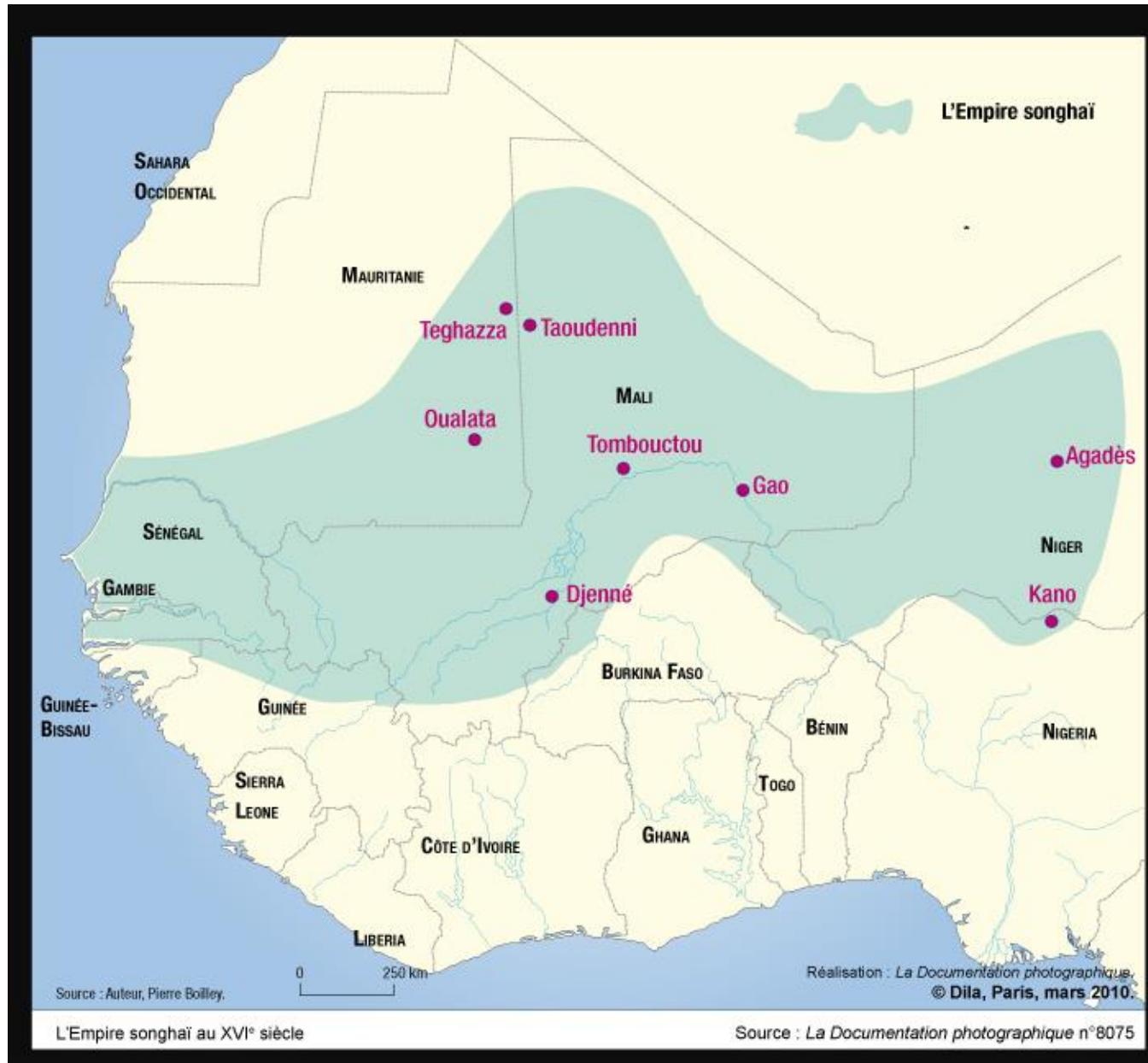
- The Songhay Empire is **the last of a trilogy of kingdoms of West Africa** which was among the most prosperous, educated and cultivated civilizations of this period.
- Following Ghana and Mali, the Songhay Empire **emerges east of the Niger bend**.
- The Kingdom has been around since **the ~7<sup>th</sup> century** - the Songhay form around **Gao** (the capital), a Muslim state whose power is at once religious, commercial and military- but was a vassal of Mali.

# Origins

## *-The Kingdom of Gao*

- Around the **mid-15th century troubles in the Mali** (empire) made it impossible to maintain control of the distant territories of the Niger Bend. Mali withdrew from Gao and Songhay gained its independence ~1464.
- **Location:** Modern Mali, Guinea, Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso, and parts of Nigeria.
- **People of Songhay** are from various cultures, resulting from centuries of crossbreeding between Touaregs, Soninke, Mandingo, Fulani, etc...They are also **part of the Mande tribes**.
- The empire was ruled by **two great dynasties:** the Sonni (or Sonyi/Sunni) and the Askia (or Askya).

# Map



- Songhai Empire at its height approx. mid 16<sup>th</sup> century under the Askia dynasty.

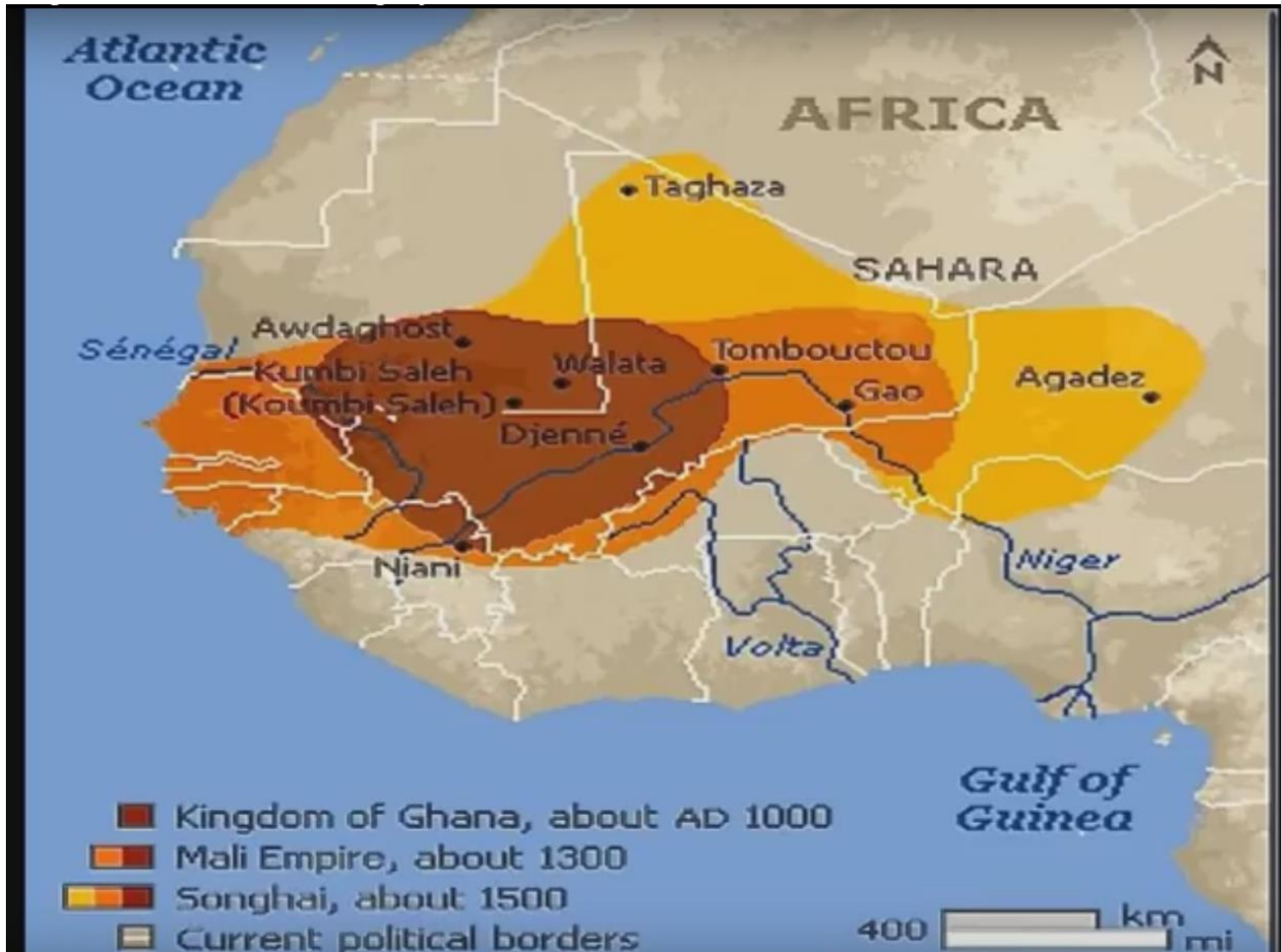
# **Kingdom of Gao under the Sonni dynasty**

# The Kingdom of Gao

*-A vassal of Mali*

- Around the 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century **Gao became an important commercial place**, as rich as Ghana (in the far west).
- By ~1320 **Gao was conquered by Mali** who was all powerful at that time and extracted taxes from the Songhay Kings until ~1430.
- After the death of Mansa Musa the Great (~1337) and the internal conflicts/weak leadership that followed, it was **impossible for Mali to maintain control of its frontiers in the far east.**

# Map - Ghana, Mali and Songhay





# The Kingdom of Gao

*-A vassal of Mali*

- With the decline of Mali, a new leadership was rising in Gao. The previous dynasty (Dia or Za, from which not a lot is known -written records at least) was replaced by the Sonni (which means liberator), starting with Ali Kolon in the early 1400.
- After many battles, in ~1430 Mali withdrew from Gao, and the Sonni were able to take complete control of their own kingdom.
- In ~1464 **Sonni Ali Ber** also known as **Ali the Great** becomes King of Gao .

# Sonni Ali Ber (1)

*-From 1464 to ~1492*

- He's been described as an **ambitious and ruthless military ruler** who was constantly on the move, leading his troops to hold off invaders and conquer new territories.
- He had a **strong military force** (both cavalry and river fleet) and under his reign, Songhay took control of both **Timbuktu and Jenne** (3<sup>rd</sup> most important city in the Niger bend).

# Sonni Ali Ber (2)

*-From 1464 to ~1492*

- With his victory over Timbuktu and Jenne, Sonni Ali was able to **turn** the small Kingdom of **Gao into the Songhay Empire**.
- After his death, he was succeeded by his son Sonni Baru, who only ruled for five months before he was deposed by a stronger leader: **Askia Mohamed the Great**.

# References

- *Empires of Medieval West Africa* by *David Conrad*.
- *General History of Africa. IV* by *Djibril Tamsir Niane*.