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CHAPTER 1

Land of Their Ancestors

In the last third of the twentieth century, it became commonplace for African Americans to speak and write sensitively of the land of their ancestors. While some of them could refer to the vast continent of Africa in only the vaguest terms, others could focus quite precisely on the specific areas from which most of their ancestors had come. The emergence of such modern independent states as Ghana, Mali, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, The Gambia, and Upper Volta evoked a deep sense of identification, even though these new countries of the twentieth century have only a slight connection with those nation-states of many centuries ago that bore similar names. The connection is there, nevertheless; and the African who left, say, Whydah, for the New World in 1800 may well have had roots in one of the African states of the Middle Ages. Those states were the land of the ancestors of New World slaves, as indeed they were the land of the forebears of their twentieth-century descendants.

When the Arabs first learned of West Africa, its civilization was already centuries old. Although the land from the Atlantic to the Nile had enjoyed limited contact with other civilized portions of the world, much of the culture that the Arabs found was indigenous to the area. It must be added that the sources of information about the history, as well as the very existence, of these states are increasing but still quite limited. One has to depend primarily on observations of travelers, reports based on information from people two or three times removed from events, and oral tradition.

For centuries some indigenous peoples had no interest in organizing themselves into states, perhaps seeing no need or advantage in erecting political institutions. Others, however, had different attitudes or needs and therefore set out to build governments to meet those needs. Indeed, many well-developed political states had risen and fallen before any lasting contact was established between West Africa and the Near East. These states sprang up in more or less the same general region, from the Mediterranean southward to the Gulf of Guinea and from the Atlantic eastward almost to the Nile. Successively, there arose in the region the states of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, along with many lesser states.

■ Ghana

The first West African state of which there is any record is Ghana, which lay about 500 miles northwest of its modern namesake. It was also known by its capital, Kumbi Saleh. Although its accurately recorded history does not antedate the seventh century, there is evidence that Ghana's political and cultural history extends back perhaps into the very early Christian era. The earliest observations of Ghana were made when it was a confederacy of settlements extending along the grasslands of the Senegal and the upper Niger. Its boundaries were not well defined, and doubtless they changed with the fortunes of the kingdom. Most of the public offices were hereditary, and the tendency was for the stratified social order to become solidified.

The people of Ghana enjoyed some prosperity as farmers until continuous droughts extended the desert to their lands. As long as they were able to carry on their farming, gardens and date groves dotted the countryside, and there was an abundance of sheep and cattle in the outlying areas. They were also a trading people, and their chief town, Kumbi Saleh, was an important commercial center during the Middle Ages. By the beginning of the tenth century the Muslim influence from the East was present. Kumbi Saleh had a native and an Arab section, and the people were gradually adopting the religion of Islam. The prosperity that came in the wake of Arabian infiltration increased the power of Ghana, and its influence was extended in all directions. In the eleventh century, when the king had become a Muslim, Ghana could boast of a large army and a lucrative trade across the desert. From the Muslim countries came wheat, fruit, and sugar. From across the desert came caravans laden with textiles, brass, pearls, and salt. Ghana exchanged ivory, slaves, and gold from Bambuhu for these commodities. The king, recognizing the value of this commercial intercourse, imposed a tax on imports and exports and appointed a collector to look after his interests.

Under the rulers of the Sisse dynasty, Ghana reached the height of its power. Tribes as far north as Tichit in present Mauritania paid tribute to the

king of Ghana, while in the south its influence extended to the gold mines of the Falémé and of the Bambuk. It was the yield from these mines that supplied the coffers of the Sisse with the gold used in trade with Moroccan caravans. In faraway Cairo and Baghdad, Ghana was a subject of discussion among commercial and religious groups.

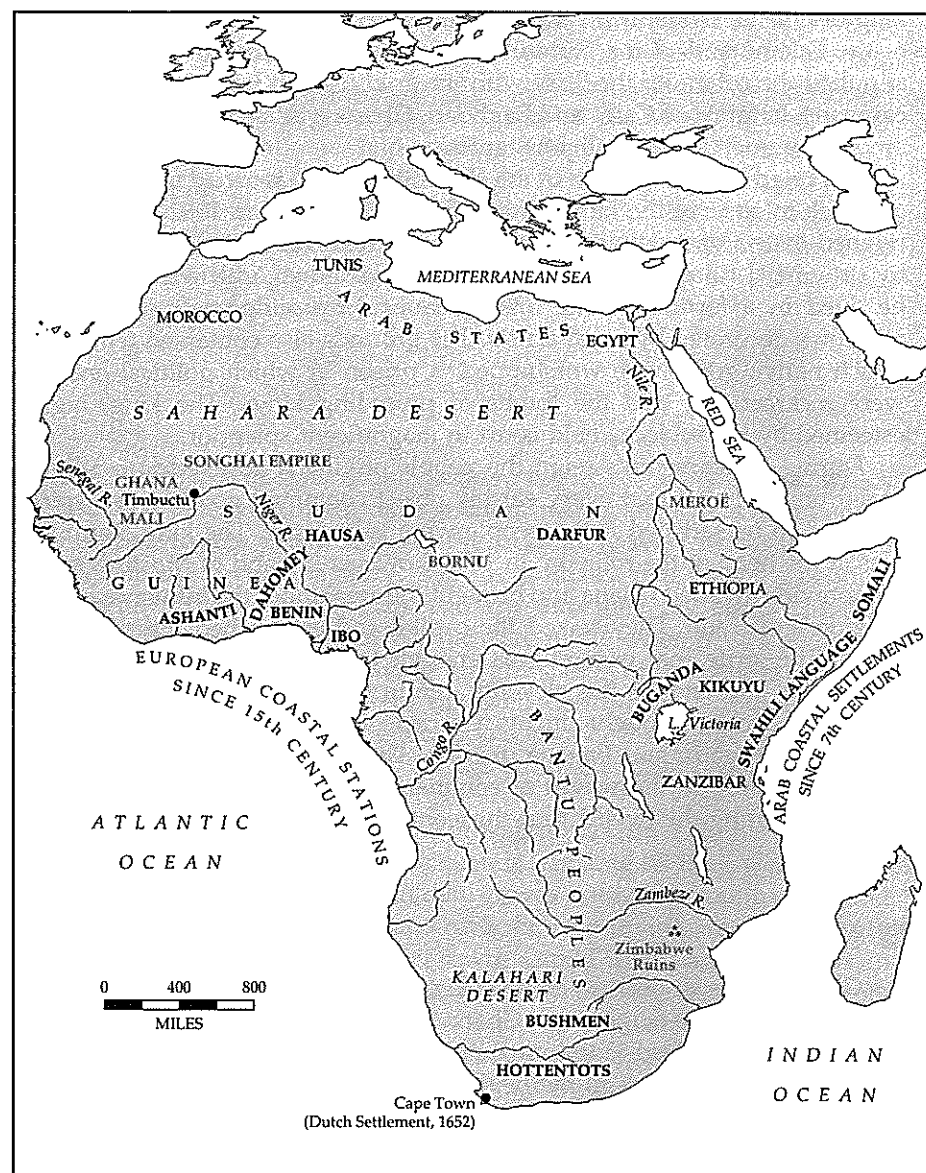
The reign of Tenkamenin in the eleventh century is an appropriate point at which to observe the kingdom of Ghana. Beginning in 1062 Tenkamenin reigned over a vast empire which, through the taxes and tributes collected by provincial rulers, made him immensely wealthy. Arab writers say that he lived in a fortified castle made beautiful by sculpture, pictures, and windows decorated by royal artists. The grounds also contained temples in which native gods were worshipped, a prison in which political enemies were incarcerated, and the tombs of preceding kings. The king, highly esteemed by his subjects, held court in magnificent splendor.

During Tenkamenin's reign the people of Ghana adhered to a religion based on the belief that every earthly object contained good or evil spirits that had to be satisfied if the people were to prosper. The king, naturally, was at the head of the religion. In 1076, however, a band of Muslims called Almoravids invaded Ghana and brought the area under the influence of their religion and trade. They seized the capital and established the religion of Islam. The strife that ensued was enough to undermine the kingdom of Ghana. By the end of the eleventh century, Ghana entered a period of economic decline brought on by a series of droughts that dried up the important Wagadu and Bagana districts. Under such trying circumstances it fell easy prey to the waves of conquerors who swept in to destroy the kingdom during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

■ Mali

As Ghana began to decline, another kingdom in the west arose to supplant it and to exceed the heights that Ghana had reached. Mali, also called Melle, began as an organized kingdom about 1235, but the nucleus of its political organization dates back to the beginning of the seventh century. Until the eleventh century it was relatively insignificant and its *mansas*, or kings, had no prestige or influence.

The credit for consolidating and strengthening the kingdom of Mali goes to the legendary figure Sundiata Keita. In 1240 he overran the Soso people and leveled the former capital of Ghana. It was a later successor, however, who carried the Malians to new heights. Various called Gonga-Musa and Mansa-Musa, this remarkable member of the Keita dynasty ruled from 1312 to 1337. With an empire comprising much of what is now francophone Africa, he could devote his attention to encouraging the industry of his people and displaying the wealth of his kingdom. The people of Mali were predominantly agricultural, but a substantial number were engaged in various crafts and



PRECOLONIAL AFRICA. This map shows Africa before European penetration in the nineteenth century. It is difficult to indicate boundaries, for even the most extensive African kingdoms had shifting and indefinite borders. Names in gray designate ancient or medieval centers which no longer exist in modern times.

mining. The fabulously rich mines of Bure were now at their disposal and served to enrich the royal coffers.

The best information that the period affords on the level of attainment of these native kingdoms comes from the accounts of royal pilgrimages to Mecca. The kings, newly converted to the religion, were as ardent and pious as any Arabs of their day. As good Muslims, they looked forward to making the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca. Such a pilgrimage, moreover, was an excellent opportunity to display the wealth of the kingdom and to attract trade. The historic pilgrimage of Mansa-Musa in 1324 exceeded all visits to Mecca by previous royal personages from the West. Cairo's El Omari said that the entourage was composed of thousands of people, a large portion of which constituted a military escort. Gifts were lavished on the populace, and mosques were built where they were needed. As the camels approached Mecca, their burden was considerably lighter than it had been when they departed for the East.

Since any such pilgrimage was a display of wealth and power as well as a holy journey to kiss the black stone of Kaaba, there was no need to proceed directly to and from Mecca. Mansa-Musa first visited various parts of his kingdom to show his subjects and vassals his tremendous wealth and to demonstrate his benevolence. He then proceeded to Tuat, in the land of the Berbers, and after making a deep impression there he crossed the desert, visited Cairo, and finally went to the holy places of Mecca and Medina. He returned by way of Ghadames, in Tripoli, where he received many honors and from which point he was accompanied to his kingdom by El-Momar, a descendant of the founder of the dynasty of the Almohads. A more significant visitor to return with Mansa-Musa was Ibrahim Es Saheli, or Abu Ishak, a distinguished Arabian poet and architect from a Granada family, whom Mansa-Musa engaged to supervise the building of elaborate mosques at Timbuktu, Jenne, Gao, and elsewhere. These structures added further splendor to the already well-developed kingdom of Mali.

When Mansa-Musa died in 1337, Mali could boast of a political state as powerful and as well organized as any of that period. Traveling in the area a few years later, Ibn Batuta, the celebrated Arabian geographer, reported that he was greatly impressed by "the discipline of its officials and provincial governors, the excellent condition of public finance, and the luxury and the rigorous and complicated ceremonial of the royal receptions, and the respect accorded to the decisions of justice and to the authority of the sovereign." In the middle of the fourteenth century Europe was just beginning to feel the effects of its commercial revolution and European states had not yet achieved anything resembling national unity; but Mali under Mansa-Musa and his successor, Suleiman, enjoyed a flourishing economy with good international trade relations and could point with pride to a stable government extending several hundred miles from the Atlantic to Lake Chad. The people adhered to a state religion that had international connections, and learning flourished in the many schools that had been established. It was not until the fifteenth

century that the kingdom showed definite signs of decline and disintegration. The powerful blows of the Songhay and the attacks of the Mossi combined to reduce the power of Mali. The decline did not go on indefinitely, however, and Mali continued to exist for many years as a small, semi-independent state.

■ Songhay

The kingdom that was in a position to dispute the power of Mali by the fifteenth century was Songhay. The latter had experienced a long and checkered career as a kingdom. Beginning in the early eighth century at Gao, near the bend of the Niger, it had remained a small, relatively inconsequential state for many years. In fact, it fell under the powerful influence of Mali, and for a time its rulers were vassals of Mansa-Musa and his successors. Undaunted, the Songhay waited for the first opportunity to throw off the yoke of Mali and to assert their own sovereignty. This they had succeeded in doing by 1355, with Sonni Ali (1464–1492) later taking Songhay, as Philip Curtin has said, “from a small riverain state to a great empire.”

When Sonni Ali began his rule of the Songhay, most of West Africa was ripe for conquest. Mali was declining, and the lesser states, though ambitious, had neither the leadership nor the resources necessary to achieve dominance. The hour of the Songhay had arrived. Sonni Ali conceived of a plan to conquer the entire Niger region by building a river navy that would seize control of both banks. By 1469 he had conquered the important town of Timbuktu and then proceeded to capture Jenne and other cities. Finally he attacked the kingdom of Mali, and with its conquest the Songhay kingdom was catapulted into a position of primacy in West Africa. Because of his lack of enthusiasm for the religion of Islam, there was considerable opposition to the rise of Sonni Ali, but he was undaunted. Consequently, his years were filled with fighting, but when he died in 1492 the kingdom of Songhay was firmly established as the dominant power of West Africa.

The day of Sonni Ali and his dynasty was over, however, and in 1493 the dynasty was overthrown by a powerful general, Askia Mohammed, who became Songhay's most brilliant ruler. From 1493 to 1529 he devoted his energies to strengthening his empire, making his people prosperous, and encouraging learning. He recruited a professional army of slaves and prisoners of war and left his subjects to engage in farming and commerce. Local rulers, four viceroys, and Askia's brother Omar, as chief lieutenant, maintained peace and administered the empire. In 1494 Omar and the army conquered all of Massina, while in subsequent years most of Mali, the Hausa states, and many other West African kingdoms fell before the power of the Songhay. Finally, the empire of the Songhay was extended from the Atlantic to Bornu and from the Berber country in the north to the Mossi and Benin states in the south. It was easily the largest and most powerful state in the history of West Africa.

To be sure, Askia Mohammed was an orthodox Muslim, but one does not get the impression that his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1497 was either for ostentatious display or merely to pay homage to Allah. This shrewd ruler wanted to improve his empire, and he knew that such a journey would prove profitable from many points of view. His retinue was composed primarily of scholars and officers of state, with a military escort numbering only 1,500 men. He and his followers conversed with doctors, mathematicians, scientists, and scholars, and they doubtless benefited from these contacts. They learned much about how to improve the administration of the government, how to codify the laws of Songhay, how to foster industry and trade, and how to raise the intellectual level of the country. Even Askia Mohammed's investiture as caliph of the Sudan can be interpreted as a move to strengthen his country.

Upon his return from the East, Askia Mohammed and his advisers instituted many of the reforms they had studied. He assigned carefully chosen governors, called *fari*, to rule over subdivisions of the empire. He appointed chiefs, or *noi*, to administer provinces and large cities. He reorganized the army on a more efficient basis. The laws of Mohammed and the Koran were the bases for administering justice. In the area of economic life, banking and credit were improved. A uniform system of weights and measures was established, and scales were inspected. Arabians and the people of Songhay were encouraged to trade with other countries. Traders from Europe and Asia visited the markets of Timbuktu and Gao regularly. With government cooperation all of Songhay became prosperous. Alexander Chamberlain has observed: “In personal character, in administrative ability, in devotion to the welfare of his subjects, in open-mindedness towards foreign influences, . . . King Askia . . . was certainly the equal of the average European monarchs of the time and superior to many of them.”

It was in the area of education that Askia made his most significant reforms. He established and encouraged schools everywhere. Gao, Walata, Timbuktu, and Jenne became intellectual centers where the most learned scholars of West Africa were concentrated and where scholars from Asia and Europe came for consultation and study. Scholars like El-Akit and Bagayogo, both jurisconsults, were educated at Timbuktu. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a distinctly Sudanese literature was emerging. At the University of Sankore black and white youths studied grammar, geography, law, literature, and surgery, while in the mosques Askia and his subjects studied the religion of Islam in order to practice and promote it more effectively.

Civil wars, massacres, and unsuccessful military expeditions followed the reign of Askia, who was dethroned by his oldest son. Although there were brief periods of revival, the empire was definitely declining. The Moors viewed the Sudan covetously and began to push down across the desert. With Spanish renegades as their allies, Moroccans overthrew the Songhay state and began their own brief rule in Timbuktu.

■ Other States

Among the other states of West Africa was the empire of Wagadugu, commonly known as the Mossi states. It was founded near the middle of the eleventh century by an adventurer named Ubri. Never a large state, it occupied the area south of the bend of the Niger; but its population was always dense, and its people had a fiercely independent spirit. For a time there were actually five states comprising the loose confederation. Cohesion was greatest in time of emergency, and they managed to repel the attacks of Mali and Songhay and remained more or less independent up until the nineteenth century when France incorporated them into its African empire. The governors of the five states constituted the council of state and served as the chief ministers in the imperial organization. Working with them were eleven ministers overseeing such departments as the army and finance. Beneath them was a hierarchy of officials, which extended to the most insignificant local functionary.

The strength of the Mossi lay in their efficient political and military system. The emperor was absolute. His subordinates operated with carefully worked out and rigidly defined duties. Each morning the emperor received his ministers of state, who reported on the affairs of the realm. In the evening the ruler dealt with matters concerning public order and criminal justice. The procedures of hearings and decisions bore a striking resemblance to the practice of trial by jury. There was no standing army, but the political and social system was so organized as to make possible the calling up for military service of every able-bodied man on the briefest notice. The survival of the Mossi states in an area dominated by powerful empires such as Mali and Songhay is a testimonial to their efficiency and wise leadership.

The Afno, or Hausa, people are said to have had seven original states, the best known of which were Kano, Zaria, and Katsina. The Hausa states occupied roughly the area that today is northern Nigeria. Each kingdom retained its identity, with Kano emerging into the limelight for a while, then yielding to Katsina, and so on. There was commerce with the other African states and across the Sahara. Katsina became a center of learning where law and theology were studied and where the language of the people was refined. It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Islam made noticeable inroads, that the Hausa states began to yield to outside influences.

To the east and west of Lake Chad resided the people of Kanem and Bornu, respectively. These people were made up of a large number of tribes that had early been attracted to the region by the oases and the lake. Some were Berber, while others were Negroid. As an organized state, Bornu-Kanem dates from about 1220, but instability characterized the government for the next two centuries. The copper mines around the lake brought prosperity to the people, and by the sixteenth century there was a semblance of order under Idris Alooma (1573–1603). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Muslims attempted to subdue these people and convert them, but

Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) Describes His Homeland

That part of Africa known by the name of Guinea to which the trade for slaves is carried on extends along the coast above 3,400 miles, from the Senegal to Angola, and includes a variety of kingdoms. Of these the most considerable is the kingdom of Benin, both as to extent and wealth, the richness and cultivation, the power of its king, and the number and warlike disposition of the inhabitants. . . . This kingdom is divided into many provinces or districts, in one of the most remote and fertile of which, called Eboe, I was born in the year 1745, situated in a charming fruitful vale named Essaka. The distance of this province from the capital of Benin and the seacoast must be very considerable, for I had never heard of white men or Europeans, nor of the sea, and our subjection to the king of Benin was little more than nominal; for every transaction of the government . . . was conducted by the chiefs or elders of the place. . . . My father was one of those elders . . . and was styled Embrenche, a term as I remember importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a *mark of grandeur*. This mark is conferred on the person entitled to it by cutting the skin across the top of the forehead and drawing it down to the eyebrows, and while it is in this situation applying a warm hand and rubbing it until it shrinks up into a thick *weal* across the lower part of the forehead. . . . My father had long borne it.

We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets. Thus every great event such as a triumphant return from battle or other cause of public rejoicing is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion. . . . We have many musical instruments, particularly drums of different kinds, a piece of music which resembles a guitar, and another much like a stickado. . . . I was named Olaudah, which in our language signifies vicissitude or fortunate; also, one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken. . . .

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, 1966), pp. 1–4.

with only slight success. Complete subjugation by outsiders was not achieved until 1900, when one portion of Bornu became a protectorate of Britain and another came under the influence of France.

The absence of substantial physical barriers in some areas south of the equator made possible the continuous infiltration of migratory tribes, which hampered political stability. The lands of the Bantu, San, Khoikhoi, and Pygmies certainly had some political organizations, and there is considerable anthropological and archaeological evidence to sustain the view that in some areas there existed rather advanced cultures. But it is clear that none of them reached the size or influence of West African states such as Mali and Songhay.

From the mouth of the Niger around to the Cape of Good Hope, there were a number of states that flourished for a time before the sixteenth century. For example, there was the kingdom of the Brama, which lay between Cape Lopez and the mouth of the Congo River and about which practically nothing is known. The so-called Empire of the Congo, founded in the fourteenth century, dominated the area between Setté Cama in the north and Benguella to the south. Inland it reached as far as the upper Zambezi. With its capital at Banya, modern São Salvador, its kings experienced difficulty in maintaining control over the tribes of the Congo Valley, and its boundaries shrank steadily in the seventeenth century because of the chaotic situation resulting from the arrival of Portuguese slavers.

South of the Empire of the Congo was a state near the present city of Mossamedes. Khoikhoi, Damara, and other tribes in the region constituted the population of the kingdom, whose ruler was called the Mataman. In what is modern South Africa there was a large, homogeneous state inhabited by the Bechuana, Basuto, Zulu, and Khoikhoi peoples. On the east coast the Matebelle and Makalaka peoples were incorporated in an ancient state that dated from the tenth century. Its instability was caused by frequent incursions by the Wazimba, a ferocious people living to the west. The remainder of the eastern coast fell early under the influence of the Muslims and became dependencies of various sultanates founded by the Arabs and Persians who gained control of East Africa. In the interior were the kingdoms of the Barotse, the Katanga, and Balubo, extending from the Zambezi to Lake Tanganyika.

The 1591 Moroccan conquest of Songhay had not ended the trans-Saharan trade; the southern terminals had merely shifted eastward to the Hausa states and the Bornu empire. By the early twentieth century, however, when Great Britain, France, and Germany were completing their conquests of West African states, the locus of power in West Africa had long since passed from the savannah kingdoms to forest-belt states located along the Gulf of Guinea to the south. When the Portuguese first sailed down the West African coast in the fifteenth century, they discovered two substantial states: Benin, located to the west of the Niger Delta, and the Kongo kingdom, near the mouth of the Congo River. At Benin, Portuguese sailors bought slaves, beads, and cloth, which they exchanged with Africans further west, along the coast of present-day Ghana, for gold dust. The abundance of certain West African goods so impressed European traders that they named sections of the Guinea coast after these "products"—pepper, ivory, gold, and slaves.

The slave trade, which became the area's dominant form of commerce, played a crucial role as an economic basis for emerging forest-belt kingdoms. The Yoruba people to the west of Benin organized themselves into a series of states, the most powerful of which was Oyo. It was the breakup of this empire in the early nineteenth century that created the unsettling conditions of war and disorder that led in turn to the delivery of large numbers of Yoruba into the transatlantic slave trade. As Oyo declined, Dahomey, a kingdom located within the boundaries of present-day Dahomey, threw off

the yoke of its former overlord. Ironically, Dahomey, which owed its seventeenth-century origins to a determination to abstain from the Atlantic slave trade, had by the late eighteenth century become a key West African center for exporting slaves. In the nineteenth century this highly centralized state was transformed from one specializing in the slave trade to one dealing largely in palm oil products. Nonetheless, Europeans used the image of a cruel, barbaric, slaveholding nation as partial justification for the French invasion and conquest in the 1890s.

Another region to share a similar fate was that of the city-states of the Niger River delta. Ibo traders had made the transition from slaves to palm oil only to be thwarted by British commercial attempts to open up Africa to European commerce. Between 1807 and 1901 Britain and the mighty Ashanti nation of present-day Ghana fought ten wars, culminating in a British conquest of that land.

The states described in this chapter are in no way a complete listing of West African political units. Furthermore, there were other African areas that witnessed the development of impressive states. Some like Egypt, Kush, and Carthage flourished during the pre-Christian era. Others came later. Some areas, like Zimbabwe and the savannah lands south of the Congo basin, witnessed different civilizations rising on the sites of their predecessors. Muslim Swahili-speaking city-states located along the Indian Ocean traded with Arabia, India, and Indonesia at a time when European powers were fighting in the Crusades. Ethiopians have a recorded history almost 2,000 years old. Other kingdoms are of more recent origin: the Zulu people, for instance, did not become a powerful nation until the nineteenth century. To a greater or lesser degree, however, all of them had some connection with the inhabiting of the New World with black peoples.