

# The Origins of the Empire of Ghana

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## *Abstract*

The present article aims at finding convincing answers to some questions related to the origins of the ancient empire of Ghana which constituted topics of research for a long time. Despite the efforts made by historians, scholars and archaeologists, an agreement about the origins of the empire of Ghana is far from being reached. Through this research, we try to develop the different findings and points of view about: the origin of the name Ghana, the location and description of this empire and its capital Kumbi Saleh, and finally the origin of its founding people. At the end, evidence may show that the linguistic approach is more appropriate.

## أصول إمبراطورية غانا القديمة

## ملخص:

يهدف المقال إلى إيجاد أجوبة مقنعة لبعض الأسئلة ذات الصلة بأصول إمبراطورية غانا القديمة والتي شغلت الباحثين لفترة طويلة. على الرغم من الجهود التي بذلت من قبل العلماء والمؤرخين وعلماء الآثار، إلا أن الاختلاف في وجهات النظر حول أصول إمبراطورية غانا القديمة لا زال قائماً. من خلال هذا البحث، نحاول عرض مختلف وجهات النظر حول: أصل اسم غانا، موقعها ووصف عاصمتها كومبي صالح، ثم أصول مؤسسيها. في النهاية نحاول أستنتاج ما هو أقرب إلى الحقيقة و الواقع بالاعتماد على التسلسل التاريخي للحدوث و تطابق المصادر.

## ***Introduction:***

Defining precisely the origins of the ancient empire of Ghana is too difficult and complex at the same time. Many scholars including historians, anthropologists and archaeologists<sup>1</sup> have been working on this subject since the early seventh century when the north African merchants established commercial contacts with the black peoples in West Africa. These merchants had started trading with West Africans in what is known as the Trans-Saharan trade in which the Ancient Empire of Ghana played an important role. They brought back home amazing stories and information that stimulated Arab and Berber historians and geographers to write about the history of the existing kingdoms and empires in West Africa. Since then, the history of the Negro lands had started to interest these scholars, particularly *Al Fazari*, *al Mas'udi*, *al Bakri* and others. Later, by the fifteenth century, European explorers contributed to shed light on the history of Africa in general and that of West Africa in particular. Recently, archaeologists have been adding new evidence that may help removing dust on the origins of this ancient empire. The work examines three elements related to the origins of the empire of Ghana: the origin of the name of Ghana, its location and description, and the origin of its founding kings.

According to the first writings about the empire, especially *Tarikh Al-Fattash* by *Mahmoud Ka't*, and *Tarikh Es-Sudan* by *Abdulrahman Es Sa'di*, the ancient empire of Ghana might have existed few centuries before the Muslim *higira*, the date from which the Mohammedan era is reckoned, in 622 A.D. The first mention of the empire of Ghana is found in the works of the astronomer *El Fazzari* just before 800 A.D.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, according to Fage, the first time it was mentioned in written history dates from 773 A.D., when the Arab writer *El Mas'udi* referred to the

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<sup>1</sup> - The area witnessed successive excavations conducted by A. Bonnel de Mézière in 1914, D. Lazartigues in 1939, P. Thomassey in 1949 and 1950, and G. Szumowski and Raymond Mauny in 1951. Source: R. Mauny, Kumbi Saleh: Capital of the 'Land of Gold', The UNESCO Courier, N° 10, October 1959, p. 25

<sup>2</sup> - Ibid., p. 24

empire as the “Land of Gold”<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the Arabic writings, particularly “*Tarikh Es Sudan*”, mentioned that the Empire of Ghana had existed since the second century A.D.

The first element to discuss in this article is the origin of the name of this empire. There exist different hypotheses as to the origin of the name ‘Ghana’. *El Bakri*, for instance, concludes that Ghana is the title given to the kings and it means “*Chief of War*”<sup>2</sup>, but *El Bakri* had never visited the empire of Ghana himself, he relies in his writings on the information brought by the north African merchants who were engaged in the gold trade in what was known as the trans-Saharan trade. The idea that ‘Ghana’ refers to the title of the kings of this empire is mentioned by A. Zabadia in his book ‘*The Kingdom of Songhai under the Dynasty of the Askias*’ :

**“The name of Ghana itself referred neither to the Empire as a geographical entity nor to its capital, but it referred to the title of the kings in the hierarchy of authority.”<sup>3</sup>**

The next hypothesis is introduced by some writers who argue that the name of Ghana is derived from the Arabic adjective *ghanna*, with a stress on the sound /n/, which means beautiful. The first Arabs who arrived there described the town as a beautiful forest which means in Arabic *ghaba ghanna*, and by the time, the word *ghaba* was omitted, they kept the adjective ‘*ghanna*’ only, to be written later ‘Ghana’ for linguistic considerations. It is also believed that the empire derives its name from the name of the chief of these invaders Maghan Diabe Sissé. A matter that seems to be hard to justify by merely linguistic evolution, that is, to accept that Maghan changed into Ghana. David Conrad, on the other hand argues that visitors from North Africa gave the name of Ghana to the *Soninké* state but the *Soninké* themselves and the

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<sup>1</sup>- J. D. Fage, *A History of West Africa*, 4th Edition, Cambridge University Press, England, 1969, p.1

<sup>2</sup>- Soninkara, ‘Apogée de l’Empire du Ghana’, 30 March 2007, <http://www.soninkara.org/histoire-soninkara/wagadou/recherches/apogee.php>

<sup>3</sup>- عبد القادر زبادية، *مملكة سنغاي في عهد الأسقيين (1493-1591)*، الجزائر، الشركة الوطنية للنشر والتوزيع، 1971، ص. 17

*Mande* peoples know the ancient kingdom as Wagadu<sup>1</sup>, a contracted form of *Wagadugu*. Likewise, it is believed that the place was first called “Wagadu”, which means “*the Land of the Wago*”. The *Wago* refers to an aristocratic clan whose leader was known as Ghana, which means *The Chief* in *Soninké*. The name of the kingdom of Wagadu would, through time, be turned into the title of their leader.<sup>2</sup> This hypothesis seems to have much in common with the interpretations of *Al Bakri* and *Zabadia* which had already been mentioned. The last version as to the origin of the name *Ghana* confirms that Ghana is derived from the Arabic word ‘*el ghina*’ which means richness, such word was given by visitors from North Africa because of the richness of land, and due to linguistic evolution the Arabic word ‘*el ghina*’ changing into Ghana.<sup>3</sup>

The second element to deal with in this article is the location and description of this empire. It is worth noting, at the beginning, that Ancient Ghana<sup>4</sup>, did not enjoy the status of an empire until the ninth century after important expansion westward. During the first few centuries of its existence it was known as the kingdom of Wagadu. However, in its apogee, the empire of Ghana, the capital of which Kumbi Saleh, was located between the northern bend of the Niger River in the east and the Headwaters of the Senegal River<sup>5</sup> in the west and dominated large parts of West Africa including parts of the modern states: Senegal, Mali, and Upper Volta. (see the Map)

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<sup>1</sup> - David C. Conrad, Empires of Medieval West Africa, Beth Adelman, New York, 2005, p. 17

<sup>2</sup> - David C. Conrad, Empires of Medieval West Africa Revised Edition, Chelsea House Publishers, England, 2010, p.26

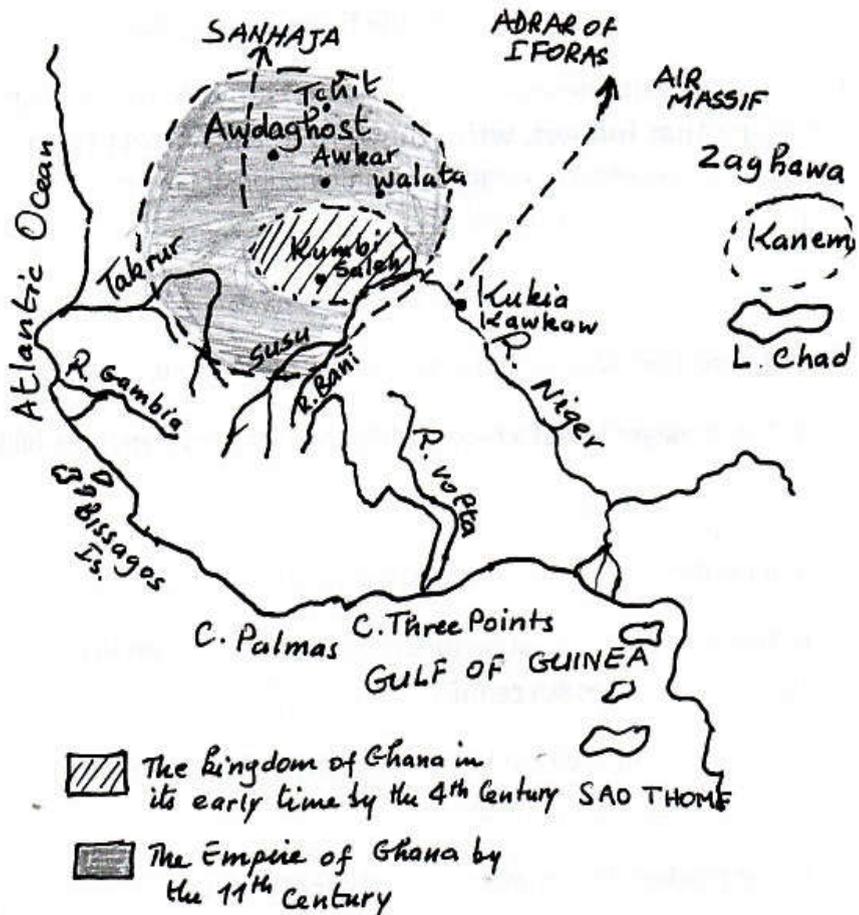
<sup>3</sup> - ظاهر جاسم محمد، أفريقيا ما وراء الصحراء من الاستعمار الى الاستقلال، المكتب المصري لتوزيع المطبوعات، القاهرة، 2003، ص 35

<sup>4</sup> - Its people were animists. Before the spread of Islam, they worshipped a great snake in a bush near the imperial palace. It was said in ancient Ghanaian legends that people were yearly thrown to that great snake as sacrifice to help them in wars and make their land fertile, and rich of gold, and cure their diseases. Source :

محمد سالف جالو، التاريخ القومي، المكتبة الإسلامية الحاج عيسى نغوايا، مالي، 1993، ص. 21

-<sup>5</sup> عبد القادر زبادية، نفس المرجع، ص. 16

Map :The Location of Ancient Ghana in Its Early Time and in Its Apogee



Source: J. D. Fage, op. cit., p.5

**Note:** This map is modified to satisfy the research requirements

In the late twentieth century, a group of archaeologists made an important discovery that helped to a large extent to find answers to some mysterious aspects of this empire. They discovered the ruins of a great town with stone buildings in a location situated at about 330 kilometres to the north of Bamako, and roughly 410 kilometres to the west of Timbuktu. These ruins are thought to be

the capital of ancient Ghana – *Kumbi Saleh*- about which *Al Bakri* and *Al Idrissi* wrote amazing stories.<sup>1</sup>

*Al Bakri* describes *Kumbi Saleh* as being divided into two separate towns: one for the negro pagans called *El Ghaba* an Arabic word which means the forest, it contained a mosque for both the negroes converted into Islam and the Muslim visitor traders. The other town, inhabited by Muslims<sup>2</sup>, was located at about six miles away from the pagan headquarters, and it contained a dozen of mosques, in addition to many houses and markets reflecting the architectural character of Islamic civilization.

It should be reminded that the Ancient Empire of Ghana which existed between the second and the eleventh centuries, is geographically different from what is known as present Ghana. The former had existed 500 miles north of the latter, and it extended on the area between the Senegal and Niger Rivers. It was centred about 300 miles west of Timbuktu and flourished from the fourth or fifth to the eleventh century A.D<sup>3</sup>. J. D. Fage, a British historian, attempted to give a precise idea about the origin of Ancient Ghana, founding his writings on the manuscripts left by some Berber, Arab and Negro historians and geographers<sup>4</sup>. He wrote in this respect :

**“Whatever its origins by the time (1067-8) that al Bakri<sup>5</sup> was writing, Ghana was a major Negro State, dependent for its prosperity and power on its control of west African exports, particularly of gold, to north Africa...”<sup>6</sup>.**

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<sup>1</sup> - Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, “A Note on the Origins of Ghana”, *African Affairs*, Vol. 51, N° 205, (Oct.,1952), p. 319

<sup>2</sup> - Ibid., p. 319

<sup>3</sup> - R. Miller, *Africa*, Great Britain,1967, p.132

<sup>4</sup> Among these Arab, Berber and Negro historians there were : al-Mas’udi, Ibn Hawqal, Ibn Khaldun, al Bakri, al Yaqubi, al Idrissi and al-Fazari.Source: J.D. Fage, *A History of West Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 2,3

<sup>5</sup> - Muhamad al-Bakri Ibn Abdelkrim ( 1042-1133) is a prominent Muslim geographer. Source :

م. باي بلعالم، أعمال المهرجان الثقافي الأول للتعريف بمنطقة أدرار، الشيخ محمد بن عبد الكريم المغيلي، الجزائر، مؤسسة الطنين للفنون المطبعية، 1985، ص 51.

<sup>6</sup> - Fage, op. cit., p.18

In fact, accurate boundaries of ancient Ghana are not easy to determine. However, it is worth noting that this kingdom expanded gradually to become a great state between the ninth and eleventh centuries thanks to two factors: first, its people mastered the use of iron with which they could make tools and weapons to invade the neighbouring states and kingdoms. Historians also reported that the use of the horse and camel, along with iron, were important factors in how rulers were able to incorporate small farmers and herders into their empires. Second, they were great traders<sup>1</sup>, and the state controlled the trans-Saharan trade in gold and salt, which allowed making important fortune through taxes imposed on traders.

In its peak in the eleventh century, it was the most important empire by its size. To the north, it was limited by Awdaghost, one of the most important cities of the Empire. In the West, the Empire stretched the Takrur land, southward of which the gold mining region of Bambuk is located. To the south, it was limited by Bouré, another gold producing zone, but the territories of Ghana did not go beyond the Wangara. The Eastern frontier of the Empire included Walata, which was to be called later the Empire of Mali. The first site of what was supposed to be the capital of the Empire was located in the southeastern part of what is now Mauritania. It is important to mention that by the eleventh century, the central authority did not have effective control over the remote regions of the empire. It was weakened by internal conflicts and external invasions from the north.

The third element to develop in this article is the origins of the founding kings of the empire of Ghana, in a broader sense, its founding tribes. Here again there is no agreement concerning the origin of the people who put the first stone of the empire. According to Al Bakri, the first inhabitants settling in the area were called “Awker”<sup>2</sup> coming from the North. In the same context, Eva

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<sup>1</sup>- Godfrey N. Brown, An Active History of Ghana, Vol. 1 From the Earliest Times to 1844, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1961 p. 11

<sup>2</sup>- Fage, op., cit., p.17

Meyerowitz states that the founders of the town that became later the nucleus of the empire of Ghana are white people. She concluded:

**‘The town is said to have been founded by a white people, and had, according to the tarikh-es-Sudan, 44 kings before the kingdom was conquered , about 790 A.D., by a black people...’<sup>1</sup>.**

This statement agrees with what was reported by *Al Idrissi* and *Es Sa’di* who confirmed that the first kings of the empire of Ghana were white people.<sup>2</sup> *Mahmoud Ka’t*, on the other hand, argued that the origin of the people of the empire of Ghana are from *Sanhaja*, Berber tribes in southern Morocco, known as the masked people, who were used to frequent western Sudan before the Islamic conquest to North Africa. Some of them settled there and established relationships through marriage with the local black people. It is thought that they had founded the kingdom of Ghana by the second century. However, by the second half of the eighth century, authority shifted from white kings to a black tribe from the *Wangara* people.<sup>3</sup>

The third version which is introduced by *Al Idrissi* who argues that the origin of the first king is from the Arabian Peninsula. He is a descendant of *Saleh ibn Abdullah ibn Al Hassan ibn Al Hassan ibn Ali ibn Abi Taleb ibn Abd al-Muttalib*, an Arab leader, the head of the clan of *Bani Hashim*, and an uncle of the Muslim prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). A similar version from another source refers to the migration of *Al Hassan ibn Ali* and his sons to Africa in about 739.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, *Ibn Khaldun* denies that *Abdullah ibn al Hassan* had had a son named *Saleh*.<sup>5</sup> In case the

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<sup>1</sup> - Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, op. cit., p. 321

<sup>2</sup> - Houdas, O., Documents arabes relatifs à l’histoire du Soudan, Publications Ecole Parisienne de l’Enseignement des Langues Orientales, Paris, 1900, p. 18

<sup>3</sup> -نبيلة حسن محمد، في تاريخ أفريقيا الإسلامية، دار المعرفة الجامعية، جامعة الإسكندرية، 2010، ص 178  
<sup>4</sup> - عيده بدوي، دول إسلامية في أفريقيا، كتب إسلامية، المجلس الأعلى للشئون الإسلامية، القاهرة، مارس 1965، العدد 44، ص 20

<sup>5</sup> -ابن خلدون، المقدمة ديوان المبتدأ والخبر في تاريخ العرب والبربر ومن عاصرهم من ذوي الشأن الأكبر، دار الفكر للطباعة والنشر والتوزيع، بيروت، لبنان، 2007، ص.70

empire had been established by the second century as stated by some historians, the latter's assumption cannot be valid because descendent of *Saleh* who migrated to West Africa in the eight century could not have been the one who established the empire in the second century. Nevertheless, the version of *Al Idrissi* gives an answer to another question that has been thought of for many years, that is, the origin of the name of the capital of the Empire of Ghana\_ *Kumbi Saleh*\_. In other words, *Saleh* is an Arabic name for males, and the capital of ancient Ghana is located in western Sudan, an area inhabited exclusively by black people, what is then the story of this Arabic name in the heart of a land known to be inhabited by the black people? In fact, *Kumbi*, which is associated with *Saleh*, means in the language of the local people a small hill, and it is evident that the Arabs are not originated from that area (West Africa). Thus, the hypothesis that says a descendant from the clan of *Banu Hashim* settled there on that small hill on the western part of the northern bend of the Niger to put the first stone (the capital) of that great empire is, to some extent, the nearest to be appropriate.

By the eight century, because of famine, the black people left their home on the eastern part of the Niger bend, to invade the newly established empire. They took over power, and since then the empire of Ghana had been ruled by black kings until its decline in the eleventh century. Its people were composed of different ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>, the *Soninke* or the *Sarakole*, the *Susu*, the arabs and the Berbers. The kingdom grew gradually and expanded westward to include southern Mauritania, eastern Senegal, parts of Mali and Guinea<sup>2</sup>. In spite of the difference in the colour of the skin, the blacks and the whites cohabited under the rule of the *Soninké* kings. However, conflicts rose later between them about the control of the trans-Saharan trade. Certainly, the control over trade changed hands between the Negroes and the whites, however, the

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<sup>1</sup>-محمد سالف جالو، المرجع السابق، ص. 21  
<sup>2</sup>-عبد القادر زيادية، مملكة سنغاي في عهد الأسقيين (1493-1591)، الجزائر، الشركة الوطنية للنشر و التوزيع، 1971، ص. 16

former were more powerful<sup>1</sup>, and therefore they could dominate it at the end.

*Conclusion:*

Through the presentation of the different points of view and the analysis of the different hypotheses about the origins of the ancient empire of Ghana, differences have been noticed in the information and the versions whether in terms of the origin of the name of Ghana, its geographical boundaries, and the origins of its founders. This could be explained by the absence of the written tradition in the empire in its early time despite the aspects of civilisation. Its people relied on the oral tradition to transmit their culture from a generation to another. It was not until the eighth century, after the Islamic conquest of North Africa, when some Arab and Berber travellers arrived there that the history of West Africa in general, and that of the empire of Ghana in particular had started to be written. Furthermore, the Europeans themselves relied, in their writings, on Arabic sources written by Al Mas'udi, Al Bakri, Ka't, and others. However, the archaeological researches remain among the important means to discover and know more and more about this empire.

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<sup>1</sup>- Conrad, op. cit., p.17

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