

Sonni Ali, One of the Conquerors of All Time

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Contrary to popular belief of the Negro race, Negro Africa has had great empires. The 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries saw the rise and fall of several.

The most famous of them was the Songhay, of Songhai, which up to the middle of the 16th Century was perhaps the greatest on earth. In any case it was greater than any European civilization of that time.

Stretching from the Atlantic Ocean across the vast width of Central Africa almost to the Indian Ocean it comprised a territory as large as all Europe.

Felix Dubois, a French writer, in "Timbuctoo the Mysterious," says:

"This accomplishment brings the greatest honor to the Negro race, and merits from this point of view all our attention. In the 16th century the Songhay land awoke. A marvellous

founder of this empire was Sonni Ali, one of the most renowned conquerors of all time. Its builder and organizer was Mohammed ben Abou Bekr—Askia the Great, another Negro.

Of Humble Origin

Sonni Ali, whose original name was Ali Kolon, was of humble origin. Made prisoner he was compelled to serve in the armies of another great Negro emperor, Kankan Musa, Mandingo ruler of the Mellistine Empire.

Kankan Musa and his empire played such a large part in the destinies of Sonni Ali that mention of both must be made here.

The Mellistine empire, which bordered on the Atlantic was founded by white people in the Seventh Century, according to certain writers.

Their Negro neighbor, the Mandingoes, making war on them, finally

teenth century, and speaks in the highest terms of it. It was then under the rule of Emperor Mansa Musa.

White Men Cannot Enter

In his "Voyage to the Land of the Blacks" (translation, Baron MacGuckin de Slane) he says several things that are worthy of mention here. He tells how he was treated with contempt in some of the other Negro kingdoms but of his courteous treatment among the Mandingoes. Of the southern Moors, he said:

"I regretted bitterly having come into a country whose inhabitants are so impolite, and who show so much contempt for white men."

He told of passing another kingdom whose borders, "no white men are allowed to pass. They kill them before they can enter."

He tells also of the great strength of the Mellistine army, and the wealth of its cities. As to the honesty of the inhabitants he relates the story of Ad Dokali, "a white man" who served as a judge.

White People "Unripe"

The emperor, Mansa Musa, had

army Kankan Musa had a secret purpose. For a long time he had coveted the empire of the Songhays, which lay on his eastern borders.

The Prosperous Songhays

The Songhays were a Negro people who had fled before the Mohammedan invasion of the Sudan (others say of Yemen), and arriving at a tract of rich land within the "great buckle" of the Niger, had settled there, building an empire with two splendid cities, one of which was Gao, and another Djenny. Up to the period of which we are writing the Songhays had had some two hundred kings in a direct line.

Djenny was one of the great commercial centres of the Moslem world. Caravans came to it from all points of the compass. Ibn Batuta who visited it tells of its grain, gold, cloth, cattle, and salt markets, and of its enormous wealth.

"It is very prosperous," he says. "God has accorded all His favors to this city as a thing natural and innate. Everyone finds great profits in going to Djenny and in the acquisition of fortunes of which God alone can tell the sum."

Musa Conquers Songhay Empire

The city was surrounded by great ramparts with eleven gates. To this Kankan Musa now laid siege, and capturing it after great slaughter, finally made himself master of the whole Songhay Empire.

Among the thousands of young Songhays drafted into Kankan Musa's army were Sonni Ali and his brother, Selman Nar.

But Sonni Ali made up his mind to escape. Burning with revenge he made a vow deep within his ambitious soul not only to free his people from the Mandingo yoke, but to make himself master of Kankan Musa's empire.

Accordingly, whenever he went out on expeditions he would carefully chart all the roads that led to Djenny. At such times he would also take food, water, and arms and hide them in secret places so that when he made a dash for freedom he would be well supplied. One day he and his brother rode away and though discovered and pursued, succeeded in arriving safely among their own people.

Sonni Ali Captures Djenny

Rallying his people, Sonni Ali attacked Djenny and captured it on January 30, 1468, after a long siege. After this victory he continued until the Mandingoes had been entirely driven out of Songhay territory.

This accomplished he began attacking the vassals of the Mandingo emperor. Songhay history now takes a great spurt, with Sonni Ali bending every effort to win. One after the other the vassals fall under his victorious lance—the Humburi, the Mossi, the Teska, the Ghana, the Bara.

Invading Senhadja Nounou, he captured the Negro queen, Bikoum Kabl. The Housas, the Senhadata, the Fulbes, the Dias, the Puhls also fall. Marching to Lake Debo, he destroyed the strongly fortified city of Ghiddo.

Vanquishes Musa's Empire

Greedy for conquest and most of all for plunder, Sonni Ali continued until he was complete master of Kankan Musa's empire.

With boundless wealth at his command Sonni Ali now turned his attention to the affairs within his vast empire. One thing had galled his proud conqueror's soul immensely, and this was that he had to pay homage to the supreme head of the Mohammedan church.

He also resented the power that the learned men and the priests wielded in his empire. All life and knowledge revolved around the Koran or Mohammedan Bible. The priests and learned men (marabouts, as they are called) used their religious power to influence politics. He thereupon decided that there was another foe to attack.

He began by indulging in religious exercises that were nothing short of derision. In observing the hours of prayers—a Moslem prays five times a day—Sonni Ali would postpone them all until the evening. At that time he would then make five quick gestures, saying after each one:

"This is the morning prayer; this is the midday prayer; and so on, concluding with: Now you may all go home since you all know your prayers by heart."

A Satirized Religious Ritual

What was formerly a long and tire-

some process, he reduced to a few minutes.

This proceeding naturally brought against him the opposition of the learned men, the priests and all who made a livelihood by religion. From the city of Sankore, noted for its university, the savants launched curses against him.

Sonni Ali decided to teach them a lesson; and marching against them put to death every scientist and priest who had not fled. As to the survivors he warned them to confine themselves to religion thereafter and to leave politics alone.

Considerable detail on this part of Sonni Ali's life has been given by Es-Saadi.

The learned men however got their revenge in writing history and so Sonni Ali has come down to us as a hard-hearted monster and tyrant. He is spoken of as "the Celebrated Infidel," "the Horrible Tyrant," "the Great Oppressor."

Es-Saadi, himself a savant, says:

"This master-tyrant, this celebrated scoundrel, Sonni Ali, whose name is spell with an 'o' after the 's' and an 'l' after the two 'i's' was endowed with great military skill and inexhaustible energy. Wicked, libertine, unjust, oppressive man of blood, he persecuted the learned and pious personages and put so many of them to

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Exceedingly generous he was subject to great outbursts of temper. At such moments the sentence of death was ready on his lips.

growth of civilization mounted there in the heart of the Black Continent.

"And this civilization was not imposed by circumstances, nor by an invader as is often the case even in our day. It was desired, called forth, introduced, and propagated by a man

overcame them, and established their own rule, extending the empire greatly and building the city of Ghana, their capital.

Ibn Batuta, perhaps the most famous of all Mohammedan travelers—a white man—visited it in the four-

given Ad Dokali a large sum of money to hold in trust. This money, the judge soon after reported as stolen. Mansa Musa in great wrath, ordered a rigid search, because up to then "there had not been a single thief in the kingdom."

It was discovered finally, through the judge's own daughter, that it was the judge himself who had hid the money, whereupon the emperor banished him to the land of the cannibals.

"But," reports Ibn Batuta, "the cannibals would not eat him because he was white. The flesh of the whites they hold is unhealthy because it has not reached its full maturity; as to the flesh of the blacks, they regard it as ripe."

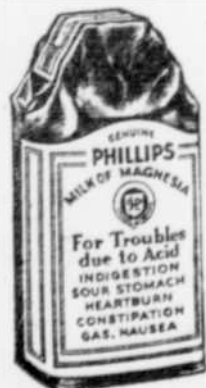
But nothing, perhaps, indicates better the great wealth of the Mellistine empire than the pilgrimage of Kankan Musa to Mecca. It is reported that his cortege was of the greatest magnificence. He was escorted by 60,000 horsemen. Preceding him were 500 slaves, each of whom held in his hand a wand of pure gold, weighing seven pounds.

Made Great Gifts of Gold

Houdas, in his translation of the Tarik-es-Sudan, says:

"In their annals the people of the East have told of the pilgrimage of this African monarch; they wondered at the power of his empire but did not speak of him as being good-hearted or generous. In spite of the vastness of his empire he gave to the holy cities, Mecca and Medina, but 20,000 pieces of gold while Askia El-Hadj Mohammed (another Negro emperor of whom we shall hear later) consecrated 100,000 pieces of gold to the same purpose."

In leaving for Mecca with this large



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