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Cities of Gold: Urbanization and Statecraft in Precolonial West Africa

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Introduction

Urbanization in precolonial West Africa was neither accidental nor peripheral to the making of states; it was central to the organization of power, knowledge, and everyday life. From the Niger Bend to the Hausa plains and the forest-savanna margins, cities emerged as deliberate projects of governance and as pragmatic responses to trade, ecology, and security. This book argues that to understand West African political and intellectual history, we must begin in the streets and squares of its cities—places where rulers negotiated authority, scholars cultivated learning, merchants structured markets, and artisans fashioned the material culture of urban life.

The chapters that follow offer an urban-centric account of medieval and early modern West Africa by focusing on institutions that made city life possible and productive. Mosques anchored neighborhoods and linked local communities to broader Islamic and scholarly worlds. Markets synchronized distant ecologies and trading systems, mediating exchange through norms of price, credit, and trust. Guilds organized labor, safeguarded craft knowledge, and ensured quality in textiles, metalwork, leather, and construction. Together, these institutions fostered dense social cooperation while giving rulers tools to coordinate taxation, adjudicate disputes, and mobilize resources for public works.

This study pays particular attention to the growth and transformation of cities such as Timbuktu, Jenne, and Kano, while situating them within regional networks that also included Gao, Bornu's capitals, Yoruba city-states, and Benin City. Rather than treating each as isolated marvels, we examine how river ports, caravan hubs, and defended capitals formed interlocking systems of exchange and governance. The Niger River, Saharan caravan routes, and forest corridors served as the arteries of these systems, carrying commodities, people, ideas, and technologies that continually reshaped urban landscapes.

An institutional lens reveals the practical mechanics of city life. We explore how qadi courts and market inspectors upheld public order; how endowments sustained mosques and madrasas; how guild charters and neighborhood councils managed apprenticeships, regulated prices, and organized mutual aid; and how taxation and tribute financed walls, roads, wells, and granaries. By reconstructing these civic infrastructures, we see how authority circulated not only from palaces but also through markets and mosques, craft houses and courtyards, caravanserais and river quays.

Urban society was always plural and mobile. Cities drew in migrants—traders from

desert oases, farmers from hinterland villages, scholars from distant centers of learning—who became “strangers” and then neighbors, shaping cosmopolitan cultures of accommodation and contestation. Women were indispensable to market exchange, property management, and household production, even as their roles were refracted through local norms and Islamic legal practice. Periods of drought, epidemic, or warfare tested these social compacts, and the capacity of urban institutions to adapt often determined whether a city declined, reoriented, or reinvented itself.

Methodologically, the book integrates chronicles, travelogues, legal documents, oral traditions, archaeological findings, and the material record of architecture and craft. Each source illuminates a different facet of urban experience: the rhetoric of royal annals, the pragmatics of contracts, the spatial logic of walls and wards, the tactile memory preserved in guild techniques and domestic layouts. Reading across these archives allows us to recover the city not as a static backdrop but as a dynamic field where political authority, moral economies, and intellectual lineages were made and remade.

Cities of Gold thus invites readers to reconsider West Africa’s past by walking its streets. To trace the arcs of mosques, markets, and guilds is to see how ideas acquired institutions and how institutions, in turn, gave texture to everyday life. By the end of this book, the cities of Timbuktu, Jenne, Kano, and their peers will appear not simply as nodes on trade maps or scenes of architectural wonder, but as laboratories of statecraft and engines of economic and intellectual creativity whose legacies continued to shape the region on the eve of colonial rule.

CHAPTER ONE: Foundations of Urbanism in the Western Sudan

The story of West African cities is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it merely a footnote to grander narratives of empire and conquest. Rather, the foundations of urbanism in the Western Sudan stretch back millennia, rooted in a complex interplay of environmental adaptation, emergent social structures, and dynamic economic activities. Long before the arrival of extensive trans-Saharan trade or the widespread adoption of Islam, communities in this vast region were experimenting with settlement patterns that would eventually evolve into vibrant urban centers. Archaeological evidence, in particular, has been instrumental in challenging older assumptions that saw external influences as the sole drivers of urban development in Africa.

One of the most compelling examples of indigenous urbanism comes from the Inland Niger Delta in present-day Mali, a region often referred to as the "breadbasket" of West Africa. Here, the seasonal flooding of the Niger River created a remarkably fertile environment, ideal for agriculture and fishing. It was in this dynamic landscape that Jenne-Jeno, an archaeological site located a few kilometers from the modern town of Djenné, began to flourish as early as 250 BCE. The site reveals a sophisticated urban complex that predates many of the commonly cited catalysts for urban growth in West Africa, such as trans-Saharan trade and the influence of Islam.

Jenne-Jeno wasn't a city in the conventional sense of a single, sprawling metropolis dominated by monumental architecture and a centralized state. Instead, it comprised a cluster of seventy apparently contemporaneous hamlets and specialized occupation mounds within a 4-kilometer radius, forming what scholars now describe as a "city without citadels." This dispersed yet integrated settlement pattern suggests a form of "heterarchy," where authority and power relations were arrayed more horizontally among corporate groups, rather than through a rigid, top-down hierarchy.

The inhabitants of Jenne-Jeno engaged in a diversified economy that included farming, fishing, and craft production, with evidence of iron smelting migrating from the main site to multiple satellite locations within the complex. The site also demonstrates early long-distance trade, with Roman or Greek beads found in its earliest levels. This thriving economy, coupled with a dense population, allowed for a complex social organization and specialization long before external factors were thought to have played a significant role.

Further north, in the Sahelian belt, other early urban centers emerged, often responding to the unique ecological challenges and opportunities of the transitional

zone between the Sahara Desert and the more fertile savanna. The Dhar Tichitt-Walata complex in Mauritania, for instance, represents an early large-scale, complexly organized society, with evidence of millet farming as early as the 3rd millennium BCE. These early settlements demonstrate how communities adapted to a changing environment, with the gradual desiccation of the Sahara leading to southward migrations and the concentration of populations in areas with reliable access to water and pasture.

The Niger River itself acted as a vital artery, facilitating movement, trade, and agricultural sustenance across a vast and diverse landscape. Its basin, with its network of tributaries, supported powerful civilizations and enabled the growth of population centers from the earliest times. The river's floodplains were crucial for agriculture and animal rearing, providing an abundant food supply that underpinned the development of early chiefdoms and trade routes.

The Ghana Empire, which flourished from approximately the 3rd century to the 13th century CE in what is now southeastern Mauritania and western Mali, provides another compelling example of early urban development. While its exact origins remain debated, the empire's wealth and power were intrinsically linked to its control over the trans-Saharan trade routes, particularly in gold and salt. This control fostered the growth of larger urban centers, such as its capital, Koumbi Saleh.

Koumbi Saleh, as described by the Cordoban scholar Al-Bakri in the 11th century, was a remarkable city, effectively two towns separated by continuous habitations. One part was inhabited by Muslim merchants, while the other served as the royal and spiritual capital, protected by a stone wall and featuring the king's palace and sacred groves. This dual structure highlights the evolving social and political dynamics within these early urban formations, where indigenous traditions often intertwined with the influences brought by long-distance trade. The ability of Koumbi Saleh to support an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 people in a Sahelian climate, with an intricate system of wells and irrigated plants, stands as a testament to the advanced architectural and engineering capabilities of its inhabitants.

The early Hausa towns, situated in what is now northern Nigeria, also represent a significant dimension of West African urbanism. The Kingdom of Kano, for example, is believed to have been founded around 1000 CE, with its capital moving to the present site of Kano city during the reign of King Gajemasu (1095–1134). While Islam would later play a crucial role in Kano's development, the foundations of its urban structure were laid in the preceding centuries. Early settlements around Dalla Hill, where iron ore was plentiful, indicate the presence of blacksmithing and craft specialization as far back as the 5th to 7th centuries.

These nascent urban centers were not isolated phenomena but rather nodes within complex regional networks. The interactions between these communities, driven by

economic, ecological, and social factors, contributed to their expansion and development. The movement of people, whether seeking fertile lands, escaping desiccation, or engaging in trade, continually reshaped the urban landscape. The establishment of specialized sites and activities within an integrated regional economy, even in "pre-urban" landscapes, suggests a long history of interconnectedness.

The concept of what constitutes a "city" in precolonial West Africa often challenges conventional Eurocentric definitions, which tend to emphasize elements like population density, monumental architecture, and a highly centralized administration. Instead, West African urbanism frequently manifested in diverse forms, from the dispersed clusters of Jenne-Jeno to the dual capitals of Ghana and the walled settlements of the early Hausa states. These varied urban expressions reflect unique adaptations to local conditions and different socio-political organizational principles.

The resilience of these early urban foundations is striking. Communities in the Western Sudan demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in exploiting their environment, developing sophisticated systems for food production, water management, and trade. The establishment of these urban centers laid the groundwork for the more prominent empires and trading networks that would emerge in later centuries. They were laboratories of human organization, where the intricate dance between community, commerce, and control began to choreograph the rhythm of urban life in West Africa.

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