



Al-Bakri on the Royal Court of Tunka-Manin, King of Ghana, 1068

He sits in audience or to hear grievances against officials in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses covered with gold-embroidered materials. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords of his country wearing splendid garments and their hair plaited with gold. The governor of the city sits on the ground before the king, and around him are ministers seated likewise. At the door of the pavilion are dogs of excellent pedigree who hardly ever leave the place where the king is, guarding him. Round their necks they wear collars of gold and silver studded with a number of balls of the same metals. The audience is announced by the beating of a drum [that] they call *dubá*, made from a long hollow log. When the people [who] profess the same religion as the king approach him, they fall on their knees and sprinkle dust on their heads, for this is their way of greeting him. As for the Muslims, they greet him only by clapping their hands.

Al-Bakri, writing in 1068 in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, translated by J. F. P. Hopkins and edited and annotated by N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), p. 80.

Mali's Rise As Ghana declined, the kingdom of Mali began to emerge as a power in 1235, although the nucleus of its political organization can be traced to the beginning of the seventh century. Until the eleventh century, Mali was relatively insignificant, and its *mansas*, or kings, had little prestige or influence. The credit for consolidating and strengthening the kingdom of Mali goes to Sunjata (also spelled Sundiata) Keita. It was Sunjata who led the Maninka (also called Malinke) people, a subject group of the Susu in a successful revolt against the Susu king Sumaoro in the early thirteenth century, thereby freeing his people and extending Mali's rule over the land once dominated by ancient Ghana. Sunjata's success in warfare was due in part to his weaponry and use of horse cavalries. Documents from the seventh through tenth centuries identify the high demand for Arabic (also called Barbary) horses imported into West Africa via the trans-Saharan trade. Seen primarily as symbols of prestige and wealth, the North African horses suffered high mortality rates because of their susceptibility to the tsetse fly, the carrier of trypanosomiasis. By the time of Sunjata's rise in the thirteenth century, however, Mali was known for successfully crossbreeding the stronger, taller North African horses with the small, but disease-resistant indigenous horses. Mali's large herds of horses of new and hardier stock facilitated Sunjata's victory. Under his reign, Mali rose in economic and military power. Preserved and mythologized in oral tradition and ritual performance, the Epic of Sunjata has been passed down over the centuries by communal storytellers known as griots and is celebrated in the nation of Mali and by Mande peoples in other African nations to this very day.