

The great power of Songhay was not to last. Askia Muhammad was dethroned by his oldest son, and civil wars, massacres, and unsuccessful military expeditions followed. Although there were brief periods of revival, the empire steadily declined. The Moors viewed the Sudan covetously and began to push across the desert. With Spanish renegades as their allies, Moroccans overthrew the Songhay state and began their own brief rule in Timbuktu.

Dichotomy of Sovereignty The rulers of empires often clashed with the leaders of the states under their control—with local authorities who resisted their mandates or acted on the basis of their own imperial ambitions. This division between central and local authority—a dichotomy of sovereignty—kept the great kings sensitive to the possibility of conflict within their realms. For example, during his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, Mali's ruler Mansa Musa shared the story of his difficulty in enforcing Islamic beliefs and practices in the states under his dominion. Devout as he may have been, Mansa Musa extended greater tolerance toward nonbelievers who were the local authorities of the gold-bearing regions, since gold production seemed to diminish whenever he attempted to impose his religion. In exchange for a more profitable gold trade, Mansa Musa agreed to respect indigenous religious customs. Few kings of great empires and kingdoms ever achieved enough power to destroy completely the belief by local rulers that they themselves should hold a degree of sovereignty.