

# History

## Mali Empire

While the Ghana Empire was gradually declining, the Soninke people who left its cities helped found several smaller kingdoms. The small Soninke states of Kaniaga, Diara, and Mema rose to the south of Ghana. The savanna lands there were closer to the Upper Niger River and its tributaries and had a less harsh climate. By the 12th century, some of the kings of these small states were Muslims. But most of the populations continued to practice the polytheistic (worship of more than one god) religion of their ancestors. One of the strongest of these states was Susu.

Most of the information about the Susu kingdom comes from Mande oral tradition and cannot be confirmed by independent sources. There is no material evidence to support this oral tradition, because no archaeological excavations have been done in that region. But the existence of a Susu kingdom is confirmed by Arab geographers.

Ibn Khaldun (1332-ca. 1406), who was born in Tunis and died in Cairo, never traveled south of the Sahara himself. But while he was in Cairo, he interviewed people from the Mali Empire. From them he learned that Susu was the most powerful of the new kingdoms, and that it had taken over some of the old territories of Ghana.

Susu was ruled through a powerful family of blacksmiths with the family name of Kanté. A blacksmith is someone who works with iron. The traditional priests of many Mande peoples have usually been blacksmiths, because they knew the secrets of how to use fire to turn raw iron ore into tools and weapons that were essential for daily life.

By late in the 12th century, Susu had expanded into neighboring regions and extended its authority over part of the old Ghana Empire. The kingdom was centered in a region that is now called Beledougou. It is northeast of Bamako, the capital of today's Republic of Mali. The local people identify their communities with ancient Susu, and there is even a village called Susu.

According to Mande oral tradition, the Susu ruler early in the 13th century was Sumanguru Kanté. He was described as a great sorcerer and a ruthless conqueror. Just to the south of Susu, in the land of Manden, there were many small chiefdoms of the Mande people on both banks of the Niger River. These chiefdoms were basically independent, although they shared cultural institutions, traded with one another, and married people from different chiefdoms.

At the beginning of the 13th century, Sumanguru expanded his territory southward. He conquered the Mande chiefdoms and added them to his Susu Empire.

## The Sunjata Epic

The Mande people's own story about the origin of the Mali Empire is usually known as the Sunjata Epic. It is named for Sunjata Keita, who is credited with founding the Mali Empire. (An epic is a story about the actions and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or about the history of a nation.)

The story begins some time around the beginning of the 13th century in Farakoro, which was a Mande chiefdom. Farakoro was near the goldfields of Buré. These goldfields had been one of the main sources of gold for Ghana in earlier centuries, and they became important for the Mali Empire, too.



Malian women working in the ancient Malian goldfields of Buré use calabashes to pan for gold dust.

The chief of Farakoro was Maghan Konfara (*maghan* means "chief" and Konfara was the town he lived in). Like all chiefs and kings of his day, Maghan Konfara had diviners whose job it was to predict the future. One day, the diviners told Maghan Konfara that he would be the father of a great hero, but that the woman who would be the hero's mother had not yet been found. Maghan Konfara already had many other wives, but he had to search for this special woman.

After a long search, the woman was finally located in the kingdom of Do ni Kiri. She was Sogolon Condé, a sister of the *mansa* (king). Sogolon was an ugly, hunchbacked woman. But she had frightening powers as a sorceress and was recognized as the woman who was destined to give birth to this great hero. So she was brought to Farakoro and married Maghan Konfara.

Maghan Konfara's other wives were jealous of the diviners' prediction and did everything they could to stop Sogolon from giving birth to the hero. After several years of trouble, Sogolon had a baby. But the child was born crippled. He was called Sogolon's Jara (*jara* means "lion"), which was shortened to Sunjata (also spelled Sundiata). It took years for Sunjata to learn to walk. But when he finally did, he became a great hunter.

One of Maghan Konfara's other wives had a son who was born before Sunjata. The other wife knew the diviners had predicted that Sunjata would be a great hero. But she was determined that her son would be the next chief. She tried to have Sunjata murdered.

Sogolon then took him and her other children away to protect them. They stopped in various chiefdoms along the way. Eventually, they traveled northeast to the lands beyond Timbuktu and settled in the old Soninke kingdom of Mema.

While Sogolon and her children were gone, the Mande chiefdoms were conquered by the army of Susu, which was led by its powerful king, Sumanguru Kanté. The Mande people suffered for a long time under the harsh rule of Sumanguru. Then they remembered that many years earlier the diviners had predicted that Sogolon would give birth to a great hero.

They did not know where Sogolon and her children had gone, but they sent out a search party that eventually found them. Sogolon had died in Mema, but her children, who were now adults, returned to Manden.

Sunjata organized the soldiers of all the Mande chiefdoms into a powerful army. They went to war against Susu. After a series of battles, Sunjata's army defeated Sumanguru and the army of Susu. The unified Mande chiefdoms formed the basis of a powerful kingdom. It expanded into all the neighboring territories and became the Mali Empire.

The Mande oral traditions do not give dates for the events they describe. But, based on what was written by Arab geographers, it appears that Susu was defeated some time in the 1230s.

## From Sunjata to Sakura

There are three Arab geographers and historians who have provided the most detailed information about the medieval Mali Empire: al-Umari, Ibn Battuta (1304-1368), and Ibn Khaldun. Ibn Khaldun reported that Mali became the greatest power in the Western Sudan. He said the greatest king of Mali overcame the Susu and conquered their country, and was named Mari Jata. This is one of the praise names (substitutes for a person's name that describe his or her best characteristics or deeds) local people still use for Sunjata.

According to Ibn Khaldun, Sunjata ruled for 25 years. When he died, his son Mansa Wali became king. Mansa Wali is remembered as a great king. He was a Muslim, and he made the pilgrimage to Mecca during the reign of Sultan Baybars of Egypt. Sultan Baybars ruled from 1260 to 1277, so Mansa Wali made his pilgrimage some time between those dates.

Despite becoming one of the greatest empires of the medieval era, Mali suffered from serious leadership problems throughout its history. Mansa Wali was followed by a brother named Wati, who is not remembered for anything special. After Wati came a third brother named Khalifa, who is remembered for the wrong reasons. Khalifa was insane, and practiced archery (shooting with a bow and arrow) by shooting arrows at his own people and killing them. Eventually, the people killed him.

The next *mansa* was Abu Bakr. He was the son of one of Sunjata's daughters—a sister of the three previous kings. This is similar to the matrilineal descent that was the custom in the Ghana Empire, where the kingship went to the son of the previous king's sister.

Although there are no records of it, Mali's leadership problems must have continued. This seems likely because the next *mansa* was not even a member of the royal family. He was a military commander named Sakura (r. 1298-1308), who grabbed the throne. Sakura probably had many people's approval when he seized power, because the royal family was not providing good leadership.

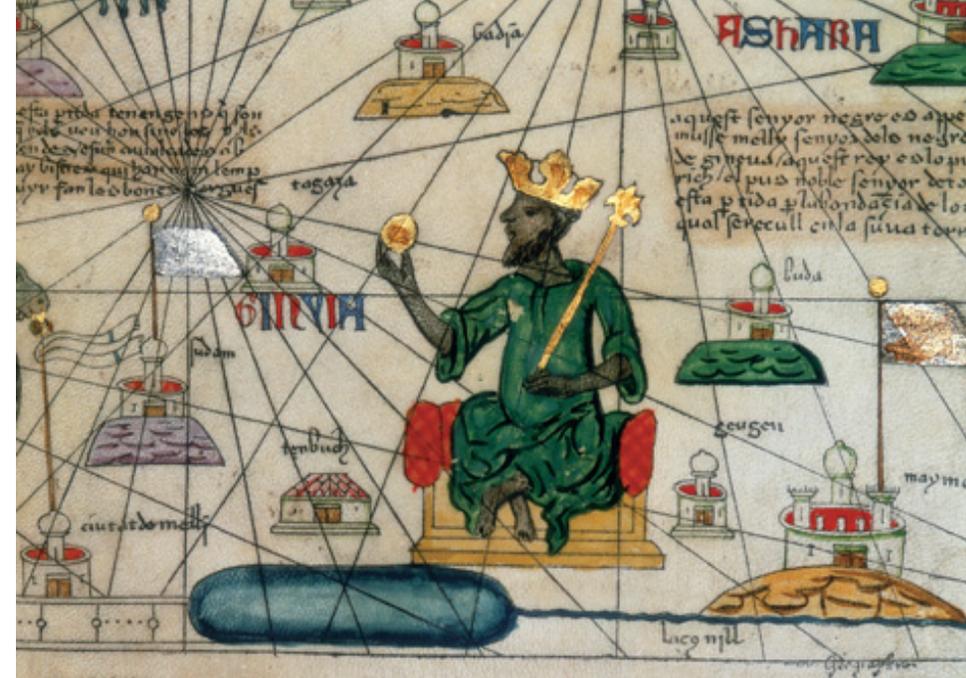
In about 1307, Sakura made the pilgrimage to Mecca. If the Malians did not support his kingship, he would not have gone away for the months such a journey required. A king without support would have been overthrown while he was away.

In fact, Sakura turned out to be one of Mali's greatest kings. He brought political stability to the empire. This enabled trade from North Africa to flourish and increased Mali's prosperity. Sakura also expanded the empire into new regions. He pushed the eastern frontier into the Songhay lands. It was probably during his reign that Mali also took control of the kingdom of Gao.

Unfortunately, Sakura was killed on his way back from the pilgrimage. Since he was not a member of the royal family, the kingship passed on to two of Sunjata's descendants. Neither of them left any memories of important deeds.

After their reigns were over, the power passed to descendants of Sunjata's brother Manden Bori. Manden Bori's descendant, Mansa Musa, would prove to be one of the greatest rulers of the Mali Empire.

## **Mansa Musa the Great**



A Spanish map from 1375 includes this illustration of the emperor Mansa Musa holding up a nugget of the gold that drew so many traders to West Africa.

Mansa Musa was famous for his piety (devotion to his religion) and generosity. His 25-year reign, from 1312 to 1337, is thought of as the golden age of Mali. Islamic scholar Ibn Kathir (ca. 1300-ca. 1374) reported that Mansa Musa was a young, handsome man who had 24 lesser kings under his authority.

Al-Umari was told that Musa had "conquered 24 cities, each with its surrounding district with villages and estates" (quoted by N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins in *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*), and that his palace was rich and splendid.

The royal flag that flew over Mansa Musa when he rode out on horseback was yellow with a red background. When the *mansa* officially met with people, he carried gold weapons, including a bow and arrows (symbols of royal power in Mali).

Mansa Musa sat on a large ebony throne that was on a raised platform with elephant tusks along the sides. Behind the king stood about 30 slaves, including ones from Turkey and Egypt. Over the *mansa's* head, one of the slaves held a large silk sunshade topped by a golden falcon.

The lesser kings sat in two rows on both sides, and beyond them were the commanders of the cavalry. In front of the *mansa* stood the sword bearer or chief executioner, and a chief spokesman called a *jeli*. The *mansa* never spoke aloud in public, but whispered what he wanted to say to the *jeli*, who would make the announcements.

Music accompanied his public appearances. There were different size drums, trumpets made of elephant tusks, and a kind of xylophone called the *bala* that is famous for its beautiful sound. There were always two horses (far more expensive than camels) tied nearby, ready for the *mansa* to ride whenever he needed them.

## Mansa Musa's Pilgrimage

Of all the sub-Saharan West African rulers who made the pilgrimage to Mecca, Mansa Musa was the most famous. When he was preparing for the journey, he consulted his diviners to find out the best time to leave. The diviners told Mansa Musa he should wait until a Saturday that would fall on the 12th day of the month. This meant he had to wait nine months before he could leave-which he did.

The journey across the Sahara took about a year and was extremely difficult. Thousands of people are said to have accompanied Mansa Musa. The king took along his senior wife, Inari Kanuté, who had hundreds of her own servants and slaves. There were also Muslims from among the Mali court officials and merchant community, soldiers to protect the caravan, camel drivers, servants, and slaves.

There were thousands of camels and donkeys to carry food, water, and other supplies. The caravan is said to have included 80 loads of gold dust. In addition to the animals, there were slaves to help carry the loads. When the caravan arrived in Egypt, the slaves were sold. Later, others were purchased for the return journey.

When Mansa Musa arrived in Egypt in July 1324, his huge caravan camped outside Cairo near the Great Pyramids. His visit to Egypt created a sensation because he carried such a huge amount of gold with him and was extremely generous in his gift giving. Among the gifts he sent to the sultan of Egypt were 40,000 dinars (gold coins). He also gave 10,000 dinars to the sultan's deputy, and was similarly generous to everyone at the Egyptian court.

When the visitors from Mali shopped in the Cairo market, the merchants took advantage of them and charged them five dinars for things that were only worth one. Mansa Musa distributed so much gold as gifts, and the Malians spent such large amounts in the market, that gold declined in value and did not recover for several years.

Mansa Musa stayed at Cairo for three months before he continued on to Arabia and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Such a journey could be extremely dangerous (Sakura was killed on the way home). This was true even for an emperor as rich and powerful as Mansa Musa who had a large armed guard and thousands of people with him.

Entire caravans had been known to lose their way and die in the great sandstorms of the Sahara. Some wells were several days' journey apart. In a dry year there might not be enough water for even a small caravan. Desperate travelers would sometimes kill their camels and drink the liquid out of their humps.

On Mansa Musa's journey, he and his caravan suffered great hardships crossing the Sahara. They narrowly escaped disaster returning to Cairo from Mecca. Sub-Saharan pilgrims were unfamiliar with the route from Egypt to Arabia, so the usual practice was for them to join an Arab caravan in Cairo and accompany it to Mecca. According to Ibn Khaldun, when Mansa Musa and his entourage were returning from Mecca to Cairo, they got separated from the main caravan. Without any Arab companions to show them the way, they were completely lost and could not find water.

They wandered until they finally came to the seashore at Suez (where the Suez Canal would be built more than five centuries later). They ate whatever fish they could find, and anyone who strayed from their main group was kidnapped by local Bedouin people and taken as a slave. The survivors were finally rescued, but according to Muhammad al Husayni al-Maqrizi (1364-1442), an Egyptian historian and geographer, as many as a third of Mansa Musa's people and camels died.

## The Return to Mali

By the time Mansa Musa was ready to return to Mali, he had used up all his gold. To pay for his journey home, he had to borrow money at a very high rate of interest.

Like any traveler to foreign lands, Mansa Musa saw things he wanted to take home with him. In his case, there were also some people he wanted to take home. When he was in Mecca, he offered a thousand *mithqals* to any *shurafa* (direct descendants of Muhammad) who would go back to Mali with him. Four of them eventually agreed to go. They accompanied him with their families and settled permanently in Mali.

Mansa Musa also returned with an Arab architect (a person who designs buildings) from Spain named Abu Ishaq al-Sahili (ca. 1290-1346). The architect built Mansa Musa a rectangular house with a dome on top. The house was covered with plaster that was decorated with colorful designs. This marked the introduction of an architectural style that can still be seen in many towns and cities of the Western Sudan.



The Jengereber Mosque was built in Timbuktu in 1324-1327 by the Spanish architect Abu Ishaq al-Sahili who was commissioned by Mansa Musa.

One of Mansa Musa's residences was in Timbuktu, and al-Sahili settled there. He is thought to have built the Jengereber Mosque in Timbuktu on the orders of Mansa Musa.

## **Commerce Brings Prosperity**

All the same goods that were traded in the regional markets of the Ghana Empire from the 10th to the 12th centuries were still traded in the markets of Mali from the 13th to the 15th centuries. The main difference was that at the height of Mali's power, it controlled far more territory than Ghana ever did. So it had even more to sell.

By the beginning of the 14th century, Mali's expansion into the Inland Delta, Gao, and the eastern Songhay provinces added enormously to the farming, grazing, hunting, and fishing resources of the empire. The new territories also provided additional sources of slaves for trade, military service, and farm production. Tribute (a payment that a lesser ruler sent to a greater ruler) from kings and chiefs in Mali territory and taxes from newly controlled trade routes enriched the government treasury.

By the mid-14th century, when Mali was at its highest point of imperial dominance, the trans-Saharan trade had greatly increased. Because of Mansa Musa's fabulous pilgrimage and the resulting publicity in Cairo, Mali became better known in North Africa and the Middle East, and even in Europe.

Stories of Mali's wealth drew increasing numbers of North Africans to trading deals across the Sahara. In the decades following Mansa Musa's pilgrimage, Egyptian traders were regular visitors to Mali. The people who lived in Mali's commercial centers, such as Walata, were dressing in clothes imported from Egypt. Mansa Musa sent diplomats and opened an embassy in Morocco, which stimulated trade with the Maghrib (northwest Africa).

Ivory, slaves, salt, copper, and animal hides continued to be important in the trans-Saharan trade. But gold was the most important item. There were three principal goldfields below the Sahara. One of the main ones, which had also been a source for ancient Ghana, was at Bambuk, between the Sénégal and Falémé Rivers. Another, also formerly controlled by

Ghana, was at Buré north of the Upper Niger in what is now northeast Guinea. The third was in Akan territory near the forest in the modern republics of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

Mali drew on all three goldfields for the trans-Saharan trade in precious metal. Merchants from North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe competed for this Mali gold.



Spreading from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the city of Gao in the east, the Mali Empire roughly followed the Sénégál and Niger Rivers. This map shows its approximate extent in 1335.

## Mansa Sulayman

When Mansa Musa died in 1337, his son Mansa Magha became king. Mansa Magha ruled for only four years before he died. He was replaced by his uncle Sulayman, who was Mansa Musa's brother.

While Mansa Musa had been very popular with his subjects, Sulayman was intensely disliked. Nevertheless, he was a powerful and effective ruler of the empire. There is an unusually large amount of information about Mali during the reign of Mansa Sulayman (r. 1341-1360), because the Arab geographer Ibn Battuta visited there in 1352-1353 and later wrote about it.

It was customary for rulers of Western Sudan kingdoms to hold what were called *audiences*, during which ordinary citizens could submit complaints and legal disputes. Since these sessions were held in public, Ibn Battuta witnessed some. His descriptions show that the royal court of Mali was as rich and splendid as any in medieval Europe.

Ibn Battuta described the palace throne room as a "lofty pavilion" with curtained, gilded arches on one side. When the *mansa* was sitting in the pavilion, the curtains were raised and a signal flag on a silk cord was hung out a window as trumpets were blown and drums were beaten. On other days, the *mansa* held audiences under a giant tree, where the throne was on a raised platform with three steps leading up to it. Above the silk cushioned throne was a large silk sunshade topped by a golden falcon, similar to the one at Mansa Musa's court.

Whether in the palace or under the giant shade tree, the royal audiences were formal and grand. An honor guard of 300 soldiers lined up in ranks outside the palace gate, half armed with bows and arrows and half with lances (a weapon with a sharp, iron point mounted on a wooden pole). Two saddled horses and two rams were always present. The horses were kept ready for the king's use at any time, and the rams were believed to provide protection against witchcraft.

When Ibn Battuta saw the *mansa* exit the palace gate to approach the outside throne, he was wearing a golden headdress and a red robe, and carrying a bow and arrows. Singers and musicians "with gold and silver stringed instruments" (quoted by Levtzion and Hopkins) walked in front of him. Once the *mansa* was seated, his deputies, councilors, and lesser kings were summoned. Each of the lesser kings had his own honor guard with lances, bows, and arrows. Marching ahead of them were drummers and trumpeters with elephant tusk horns.

## The Tyrant Mari Jata II

Mansa Sulayman died in 1360 after ruling for 19 years. His son Kanba took over the throne, but that same year, civil war broke out. Sulayman's sons and the sons of his brother Mansa Musa were fighting over who would be king.

Kanba died after only nine months in power. He was followed by Mari Jata II. He was the grandson of Mansa Musa and the son of Mansa Magha, who had died after only four years in power.

Mansa Magha had ruled the country for his father, Mansa Musa, while he was on pilgrimage. Then, when Mansa Musa died, Magha took over the power. But Mansa Musa's brother Sulayman was the next oldest, and had expected to step into power when Musa died. Since Musa's son Magha died after only four years in power, it has been suggested that Sulayman killed him.

Once in power, Mari Jata II proved to be a vicious tyrant (a ruler who uses his power in a cruel and unreasonable way). He caused much suffering among his subjects. Ibn Khaldun talked to a man who lived in Mali at the time, and was told that Mari Jata II "... ruined their empire, squandered their treasure, and all but demolished the edifice of their rule" (quoted by Levtzion and Hopkins).

One of the king's most notorious deeds was to sell a huge gold nugget at a cheap price to some Egyptian traders. The person Ibn Khaldun interviewed described it as a "boulder" that was regarded as Mali's most precious national treasure. After years of abusing his subjects and stealing from his country, Mari Jata II fell ill with sleeping sickness. Many Malians were probably relieved when he died two years later, in 1373.

## Power Struggles End an Empire

Nobody knows the reason, but many of the descendants of Sunjata and his brother Manden Bori proved to be incompetent leaders. When Mari Jata II died in 1373, his son Musa was appointed the next king. Mansa Musa II (r. 1373-1387) was not at all like his father. He was a fair, wise, and considerate ruler, but he was too weak to maintain control of his kingship.

Musa II had a very strong and ambitious advisor who managed to take control of the government. Although the advisor's name was Mari Jata, he was not believed to have been a member of the royal family. To avoid confusion he is known as Mari Jata III.

Musa II was still the recognized *mansa*, but he was kept hidden and became a mere puppet of Mari Jata III. Jata took all the power into his own hands.

The Mali Empire had already been seriously weakened by the civil war that followed Mansa Sulayman's death and by the irresponsible reign of Mari Jata II. Even though Mari Jata III was not the recognized *mansa*, he worked hard to revitalize Mali's imperial power. He sent the army into the Sahara to fight the Tuareg for control of the salt and copper sources near Takadda. He also renewed or expanded Mali's control over the eastern frontier beyond Gao.

Another power struggle began when Mansa Musa II died in 1387. He was followed by his brother Mansa Magha II (r. 1387-1388), who was also weak. Once again, a member of the royal family was only a puppet ruler controlled by a powerful government official. Mansa Magha II was killed after only one year as king.

He was replaced by Sandaki, a member of the imperial council. Sandaki had married Mansa Musa II's mother, but he was not part of the ruling family and had no real right to be king. After only a few months in power, Sandaki was assassinated by a member of the royal family. Finally, in 1390, the throne of Mali was recaptured by Mahmud Keita, a descendant of Sunjata, the great hero.

Mahmud is the last of the Malian *mansas* mentioned by the Arab geographers. Others are mentioned in oral tradition but they are not associated with any dates, so there is no way to know how they fit into the historical picture.

By the end of the 14th century, generations of power struggles and weak leadership had undermined Mali's power. The time was approaching when it would be impossible to maintain control of the empire's distant frontiers. Mali lost control of Timbuktu around 1433. Beyond the Niger Bend, the more distant eastern provinces, including Gao, had probably been lost before that.

Some time around 1460, a king of Gao named Sulayman Dama attacked Mema, which had been one of Mali's provinces west of Timbuktu. After Sulayman Dama, the next ruler of Gao was Sii Ali Beerli (sometimes spelled Sunni Ali). He transformed that kingdom into an empire that would replace Mali as the great power of the Western Sudan.

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