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Mansa Musa I of Mali: Gold, Salt, and Storytelling in Medieval West Africa

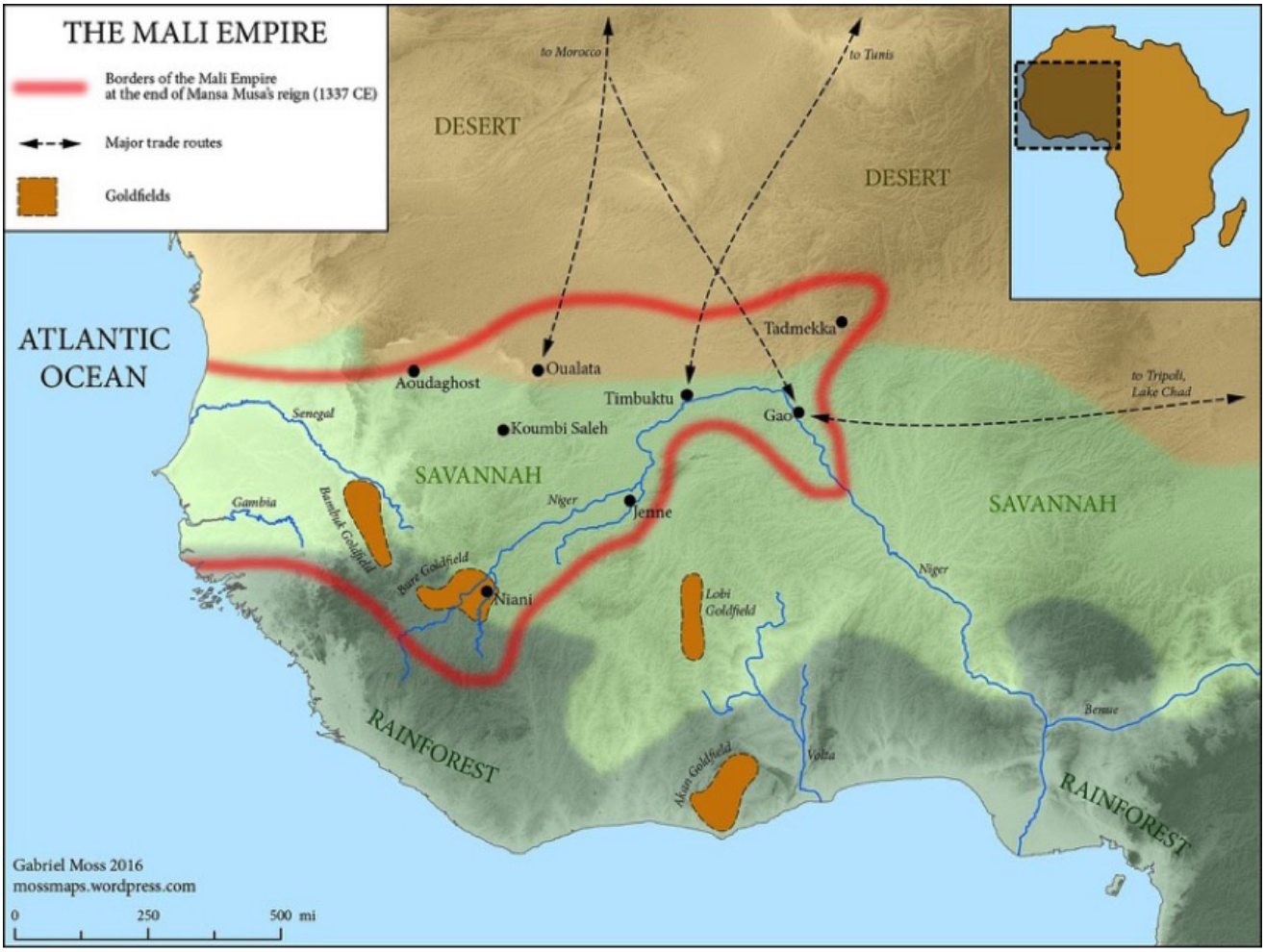

Fig. 1: the Malian Empire at the time of Musa's death (source: Wikipedia Commons)

In 1312, the reigning emperor of Mali – Mansa Abubakari Keita II – sent 200 manned boats and 100 support boats containing supplies to sail until they found the edge of the Atlantic. After a long excursion, one boat returned. Its captain bore only a horror story about the whirlpool that had swallowed his comrades. Unimpressed (and perhaps obsessed) the emperor chose to make the expedition himself – this time with a retinue of 3,000 ships. He chose his deputy, Musa – a member of the court with no blood relation to the king – to act as ruler in his absence. The deliberate appointment, untainted by the hereditary rule that has produced so many poor monarchs, is likely a testament to the character and abilities of Musa.

Abubakari Keita never returned; some believe he might have reached South America.[1] Regardless of his final resting place, Mali was not destined to become a seafaring empire, and instead of the west, Musa looked to the east. With his feet firmly on dry land, the successor Mansa Musa of Mali ('Mansa' meaning emperor, conqueror, or sultan) became the richest man in history – a wealth that grew alongside Mali's

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territory during his reign. In 2019, the richest person on the world, Jeff Bezos, was worth $117 billion; in the fourteenth century, the estimated net worth of the emperor of Mali was equivalent to $400 billion today.

Africa is often forgotten in histories of the Middle Ages. Scholars have focussed on Europe and the Middle East, often analysing the role of gold in the Crusades and holy wars between the two cultures, and ignoring the origins of the gold in question – more than half of which came from the Malian Empire. The gilding on paintings of European monarchs, forming golden haloes around the heads of heads of state, came from Mali; so did the gold of the Muslim world, sought by European crusaders marching east. European states indirectly based their currencies on Africa's precious metals.

Mali's material wealth was in gold, but Musa's greatest contribution to the empire was intangible, measured in national identity and intellectual development. The exchange rate between gold and cultural power is hard to quantify, but it appears that Musa negotiated it well. Dr. Gus Casely-Hayford, an African historian and the director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, explains that the Malian fixation on cultural and artistic legacy 'was not just a tradition centred on art', but 'a mechanism for formalising record, for controlling historical narrative'.[2]

Mali has a long and rich tradition of music, poetry, pottery, jewellery, and storytelling. However, the years between Musa's ascension and his death saw the peak of the Malian Empire, whether measured in cultural production, material wealth, or the vastness of its territory. Musa's story – marked by his ability to construct an imperial narrative, his gift for institution building, his management strategies, and his extraordinary knack for public image – is one that sheds light on medieval Africa, on the hemispheric balance of power, and on the art of nation-building itself. The cultural legacy of the Malian Empire, though obscured and displaced, survives to this day.

Islam in Medieval Africa

The Malian Empire was vast and stretched east to west from the Atlantic coast to the bend in the Niger River. From north to south, it spanned from the arid sub-Sahara to the verdant forests of equatorial Africa, encompassing half a million square miles.[3] Countless languages were spoken, and though the communities incorporated were predominately Muslim, there were many other animistic religions practiced on a highly localised basis across the empire. In short, the empire inherited by Mansa Musa was enormous, atomised, and difficult to govern.

Musa was faced with the task of ruling over a diffuse people with little sense of inherent belonging to the empire in which their traditional territory lay. Military control was an option. Mali maintained a standing army of tens of thousands, and its cavalry had long been feared across West Africa. The territory Mali already held had not all come quietly.

However, Musa preferred a less aggressive approach. Caseley-Hayford, perhaps the foremost expert in medieval Malian culture, argues that Musa had an uncanny ability to weave a narrative – that he understood that an empire's success should rest not just on military force, but upon creating an understanding on the part of its inhabitants that they were part of something bigger than themselves.[4] Musa used Islam as an institution to which all might belong. He declared it the state religion, and elevated its importance in the royal courts, though he stopped short of applying the law of the Quran as the law of the land.

Musa's attempt to unify his population through faith had mixed success. Though many converted, Mali's southern gold miners, the engine of the imperial economy, resisted pressure from the state. Long-committed to their traditional religion, they downed tools in protest. Output dropped sharply, and the same mistake was not made again. Musa never outlawed other faiths, never fought a religious war, very rarely applied Muslim doctrine by law, and often performed the traditional rites and ceremonies of the Madinke, a prominent Malian indigenous group. Musa also presided over courts influenced by other local faiths, including witchcraft trials – a nod to the legitimacy of animism. As long as citizens were willing to pay taxes and serve in the military when called, the empire would tolerate (and even endorse) alternative religious expression.

The relationship between traditional faiths and Islam was syncretic. Rather than one supplanting the other, they tended to coexist and even merge (though as a general rule of thumb, cities were predominately Muslim, and remote regions were predominately traditional). Despite the pockets of resistance to conversion, a cohesive Muslim identity took shape in Mali, tempered by a lingering adherence to

traditional religion. In general, as tribes became more embedded in modern trading networks, they turned to Islam. Compared to local tribal religions, Islam had more of an emphasis on connectivity, agriculture, modernity, and trade; it connected its practitioners to a broader global community and political structure, where animism prioritised a hyper-local connection to the tribe's geographical environment.

The most enthusiastic converts were Mali's travelling merchants and traders, who worked the far-ranging caravans that underpinned Mali's economy. These merchants benefitted not only spiritually from a location-independent system of faith, but were also able to leverage the cultural capital that Islam offered further afield. In unfamiliar territories, a common faith was a foot in the door, useful for establishing relationships with traders. Some of the earlier converts were the Sanhaja Berbers (a nomadic people) and the Wangara (long-distance traders). African historian Bonnie L. Wright notes that their mobility worked to weaken their devotion to their traditional religions, which revolved around land spirits. In Wright's words, 'Islam and trade diffused together'.[5]

There were significant structural advantages not only to individual traders but also to a state willing to assimilate into the Islamic global community. Muslim scholars had unparalleled access to mathematics, science, and mysticism from India, Iran, Greece, Egypt, and China. The systematic use of slaves for labour and production created free time for others to specialise, honing their crafts. Muslim scholars had become known as the primary experts in their fields of study, making them excellent advisers to West African kings, merchants, and warriors – thus cementing their cultural relevance in the region.[6]

Islam was a diplomatic asset, used by the Mansa to deepen international relationships and build cooperative institutions. Musa frequently sent Malian scholars to Fez, Morocco's most prominent city of learning – and one of the most important in the Muslim world. His religion also gave him immunity from invasion by developed neighbouring states, reluctant to attack a Muslim ally during the centuries of Christian crusaders, as well as developed rights of entry to other Islamic nations.[7] Mali was Muslim before Musa ascended to the throne; however, he was the first Mansa to suffuse the empire with enough religious fervour to become (according to Islamic archaeologist Timothy Insoll) 'a true Muslim empire'.[8]

Salt and Gold: Mali's Trade Routes

Mali's wealth depended on its resources, and its ability to facilitate their trade. The empire's position along the Niger River Basin situated it at the crossroads of several major trans-Saharan trade routes. Melli – the capital city whose name meant 'where the king lives', and from which the name 'Mali' was derived – was known as the terminus for caravans from the Maghrib, Ifriqiyya, and Egypt. Contemporary writers marvelled at its flourishing markets, and observed that 'goods are brought there from every quarter' of Africa.[9]

Three of the most important commodities along these routes – and under Malian control – were salt, gold, and the kola nut: salt was mined in the north, at Taghaza, and was carried in the form of large tablets on the back of camels across the desert; gold was mined in abundance in the south, at Bambuk, then the source of approximately half the world's gold supply; the kola grew in the nearby forests of Akan. Of the three, salt and gold were the most significant (and best remembered). Their allure had catalysed the development of the empire itself: Malian authority was established through the migration of the Malinke (also called the Mandinka), who moved west in search of salt and gold.

Salt was vital to the Saharan traveller: not only was it vital for the preservation of food, but it was also used to replace bio-salts lost through sweat on long journeys through one of the most arid, hard-to-traverse regions on earth. Long-term survival in such a hostile environment was fraught, if not impossible, without it. The kola also served primarily to offset the difficulties of desert life: the fruit contained a stimulant that suppressed thirst and eased travel.

Gold, as ever, held its value inherent – though this was particularly high in the fourteenth century. By far the most significant source of gold came from the western Sudan; Europe and (to a lesser extent) the Middle East suffered from an acute shortage of the precious metal. As gold had little place in internal trade, its price too high for a desert people with far more use for salt and kola, it was instead used to purchase fabrics and paper from the Maghreb and Egypt, and copper, weapons, and horses from North Africa and Europe. European goods could be purchased at a low price locally, due to Europe's lack of gold and the Muslim world's concurrent abundance. In the words of historian Astley Goodwin, 'the Crescent had access to gold. The Cross did not.'[10]

Fig. 2: Musa and his gold, from the 1375 Catalan Atlas (source: Wikipedia Commons)

Though Musa preferred to secure trade and cooperation through cultural inclusion, he was willing to make exceptions. His standing army was tasked with eradicating the bandits stifling trade in the Sahara, and desert trade expanded. Far greater quantities of Chinese silk, Persian fabrics, Indian spices, European metalwork, and Arabian horses travelled through Malian territory,[11] all of which were subject to taxation and tribute.

Mali regarded economic power as the control and authority over trade routes more so than controlling the sources of traded materials, such as goldmines or forests. They did this by taxing caravans entering their land, and taxing them even more to let them leave unfettered. Caravans were a multi-faceted driver of Mali's economy: as Melli, the capital city, served as the premier trader destination in West Africa, caravans drove other economic activity. Leo Africanus, the Berber diplomat and author, described Melli as a 'very large village of nearly 6,000 dwellings'. The travelling North African noted that it possessed 'abundant grain, meat, and cotton' as well as 'numerous artisans and merchants, both local and foreign.'[12] Artisans flourished there, catering to traders who, anticipating both an arduous journey home and an imminent payday, were likely inclined to buy goods that may ease either their passage or their exhaustion. The mobile population also drove agricultural development – Musa offered protection for routes that fed passing caravans, often using slave labour to do so.

In fact, the goldfields were deliberately distanced by degrees from the Malian economy: they were kept secret from outsiders by using Sudanese middlemen, and by the practice of 'silent trade'. Foreign traders would set down goods at a natural barrier – traditionally at a riverbank – and retreat. Miners would then inspect the goods, and leave sums of gold indicating what they were willing to pay. The traders would then return to take the gold if the offer was acceptable to them, or leave it to extract a higher sum if it was not. This informal regulatory structure protected Malian interests: it kept goldfields a secret, prevented the violation of territorial borders, and limited access to a vital monopoly. The exclusion also contributed to the near-mythical status of Mali's gold reserves: the invisibility of the mines and stock created an allure and encouraged wild speculation as to the extent of the region's wealth.

On some level, indirect control of trade routes appears to have been a necessary capitulation to the diversity of the empire. Gold was mined by traditional communities with animistic faiths, occupying territories loosely incorporated into – or sometimes entirely outside the borders of – the empire itself. Sources suggest that successive Mansas learned to manage their relationships with Bambuk's miners – and the wealth the crown amassed in tribute and taxation suggests that they did so successfully. The laissez-faire economy (somewhat unusual in an imperial setting, which typically prioritises state control) was also a reflection of the time and place in which it occurred. To manage these operations from Melli would be a logistical nightmare: geographically and culturally dispersed micromanagement, traversing both the medieval Sahara and multiple language barriers, would clearly be untenable.

Rather than directly controlling the goldfields, Musa appeared content with a combination of tribute from the miners, and taxation from the trading caravans that dealt with them. Clearly, this practice provided sufficient income for the empire. The amount of gold transported out of Mali – without the need for costly or complex logistical operations on the part of the state – was enormous. Even Portugal's currency was indirectly based on Malian gold, arriving via Morocco. Instead of maximising income from the goldfields already under Malian control, Musa increased imperial revenue by seizing more territories, largely at the expense of the rival Songhai Empire: twenty-four new cities were incorporated into Mali across his reign – several of which lay in gold country.

Musa's investment in trade and hands-off management paid dividends as the economy grew ever more dynamic: Mali experienced an expansion of both its borders and international prestige. While the imperial account books are long closed to history, Musa's reputation – and his Hajj – indicate that Mali's economy, though decentralised from the crown, was more than sufficient.

From Mali to Mecca

In 1324, Mansa Musa undertook the Hajj – the pilgrimage to Mecca, located in what is now Saudi Arabia, that all Muslims are expected to complete at least once. He chose to go overland – an unsurprising choice, given the fate of his predecessor. He travelled at least 6,000 miles along the caravan routes that formed one of the most important trading links of his empire, taking him along the Maghreb to Egypt, and from Egypt on to Mecca. The overland route, besides avoiding a watery grave, had the advantage of providing some of the most impressive networking opportunities in medieval history.

The problem that hinders our understanding of Musa's domestic reign – a lack of written sources – does not apply to his Hajj. Musa journeyed in style, and people took note. The emperor took with him 60,000 people – many of whom were drawn from his military, and 12,000 of whom were slaves. All wore expensive brocade fabrics and silks, and carried gold bars. Five hundred slaves marched ahead of Musa as he rode, each carrying a staff of pure gold. Eighty camels travelled alongside, carrying his spending money in the form of gold dust. Other reports, though less substantial and substantiated, suggest that he also travelled with horses and elephants.[13] When his second wife complained of the desert dust, Musa ordered a complex irrigation system be built, consisting of 'dozens of metres' of oiled trenches, to fill her bathtub.[14]

As he went, he continued to demonstrate both Islam's importance to him personally, and its value as a connective diplomatic asset. The fact that the emperor had taken leave of his throne to journey to Mecca was already impressive, but Musa underscored it by famously having a mosque built wherever his train halted on a Friday. There are differing opinions as to how this worked. Some sources suggest he commissioned the construction of a mosque wherever his train stopped; others claim that his retinue carried with them a deconstructed mosque, to be erected at will for the purpose of prayer.[15] As for diplomacy, he used his faith to ease his relationship with local rulers. There was also a protective element to having such an entourage; decades previously, another Mansa attempted the Hajj, only to die at the hands of bandits in the Sahara. Musa's journey was redemptive, and showed that Mali's strength had since grown.

Though reasonable in the given context, the ostentatious militarism of the pilgrims created moments of tension. Musa's arrival at the royal court of the Mamluk sultan in Cairo, Al-Nasir Muhammad, is one such moment. The emperor arrived with a caravan of 60,000 men, resembling an invading army. At the very least, it was a tangible show of strength. Muhammad likely did not want to bow to him – it would have been too great a capitulation to a flexing foreign emperor. Musa, building prestige abroad, would not have wanted to bow either – it may have undermined the display of his power. Instead, Musa entered the court and kissed the ground in praise of Allah, winning the sultan's favour. It was a saving of face for both leaders.[16]

The most famous detail of Musa's pilgrimage relates, rather predictably, to gold. Already making quite a stir with the size of his cortege, Musa topped it off by being the only man in recorded history ever to crash an entire region's economy through sheer generosity. He was a liberal tipper: reports indicate that the emperor gave away 20,000 gold pieces in each of Cairo, Mecca, and Medina, as well as buying trinkets and souvenirs at any asking price – a questionable financial decision on any tourist trail.

The injection of gold into the Egyptian economy dramatically depreciated the metal's value, and prices of goods soared as the economy tried to adjust. On his return journey, Musa attempted to fix the hyperinflation he had wrought by borrowing back as much of the gold he had given as possible. Moneylenders in Cairo, delighted at the opportunity, charged enormous rates of interest. The value of gold recovered, and prices returned to normal – until Musa made it back to Melli. He quickly repaid his debts, plus interest, in a single enormous payment. Moneylenders' businesses collapsed as the price of gold plummeted once more. Mansa Musa, with his casual display of unimaginable wealth, had ruined, repaired, and ruined again the gold economy of Africa and the Middle East – and by extension, that of Europe.

Musa's international prestige soared. His expedition literally put him on the map: Musa is displayed prominently in the 1375 Catalan Atlas, where he sits upon his throne in Sub-Saharan Africa, holding a golden sceptre in his left hand, gazing at a gold nugget in his right. A crown (predictably, gold) rests on his head. Curiosity about Mali grew, and speculation with it. Mali boasted such abundance that one legend

described it as ‘a place of gold producing plants whose nuggets were harvested like carrots.’[17] It was Africa’s El Dorado.

Mecca, at the time, was a who’s who of significant figures – and fertile ground for a recruitment drive. The Islamic world’s finest thinkers and rulers gathered in Mecca, and it was an opportunity for Musa – the man of the hour – to futher build his prestige by introducing them to the Malian Empire.

Musa exploited the opportunity, absorbing poets, architects, mathematicians, and philosophers into his escort for the journey home. He also acquired four sharifs (descendants of the Prophet Mohammed) who returned to Mali with him. Musa had united two of Mali’s most prominent characteristics – the importance of Islam, and the importance of its trade routes – with his pilgrimage. The presence of the sharifs encouraged further trade with the Muslim world, as did the new trade routes that he and his caravan established along the way. Musa’s Hajj was a spiritual exercise, but also one in building intangible institutions that would cement the empire’s dominance with an absence of violence that ran counter to medieval tradition.

Musa was slightly ahead of his time, though his preference for terrestrial travel made him an outlier. Despite his wealth and power, few European states had heard of the Mansa before his pilgrimage; in the Middle Ages, information travelled slowly, and often needed something of a kickstart. Reputation was a valuable thing. Rumours of economic strength attracted trade and tribute, and a reputation for military might was as useful as a standing. As valuable as rumours may be, sometimes the best way to introduce yourself was in person – and so began the Golden Age of Exploration. In 1405, the Ming government sponsored the first overseas expeditions from China. Columbus, famously, set sail from Spain in 1492. All sought roughly the same thing Musa did: growth. States worldwide were reaching the point at which growth and development could only be maintained through contact with other cultures. In some cases (including Musa’s) the goal was cooperation and mutually beneficial exchanges of goods and thought. Others broke from their isolation intent upon hostile takeovers.

The Adopted Polymath

One of the pilgrims adopted by Musa was an Andalusian poet and architect named Abu Isak, better known as Al-Sahili. His experience reveals Musa’s ability to acquire people at Mecca, and to build institutions and connect Mali to Europe and the Middle East, centres of contemporary power, using his wealth and his faith.

Al-Sahili was born to business-minded parents in Andalusia, a Muslim region of Spain, where he established himself as a literary figure – a successful poet and drafter of legal documents. After finding himself in a scandal, the details of which are long lost, he left Andalusia and went east. His travels took him through Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and the Yemen before he embarked on the Hajj that introduced him to Mansa Musa. Musa’s interest in him was likely driven by Al-Sahili’s knowledge of Islamic law – Musa acquired several jurists in Mecca, who were spirited away to rethink and codify Mali’s legal structures.

Fig. 3: the Djinguereber Mosque built by Al-Sahili in 1327 (source: Wikipedia Commons)

Adopted for his jurisprudence, Al-Sahili indeed brought new knowledge to the empire; unexpectedly, however, it was in architecture, a skill that he did not seem to have applied beforehand. Once in Melli, he oversaw the construction of a royal audience chamber, and went on to design and build several other significant buildings – most notably Timbuktu’s Djinguereber Mosque, which still stands today. Some archaeologists believe that Al-Sahili brought the method of burnt-brick construction to West Africa, forever changing the region’s architecture; others have credited him with the invention of the Sudanese mosque style.[18]

The Andalusian polymath took up residence in Timbuktu, continuing to work as both an architect and a scholar. There are hints that he played a role too in Malian diplomacy: he had a positive relationship with the Marinid sultan Abu Al-Hasan, to whom he had presented gifts as tribute and from whom he had received 'a handsome reward'. Subsequently, in 1337, Al-Sahili wrote a poem to the Marinid sultan encouraging him to wage war against Tlemcen – which happened shortly afterwards. Musa sent gifts and congratulations after the successful campaign, suggesting that it was advantageous to Malian interests.[19] Though the paper trail is incomplete, it is not difficult to infer that Al-Sahili operated as a middleman between two rulers who independently held him in high regard. In exchange for his extensive service, Musa showered Al-Sahili with gold – proving once again that he knew how to establish an exchange rate between tangible Malian gold and intangible benefits.

Building Timbuktu

While Musa trudged to Mecca, Sagamandia (his trusted general left in charge of state affairs) marched on Mali's neighbours. Musa returned to an empire that had expanded to include several other territories, arguably the most significant of which was the city of Timbuktu.

Musa's influence turned Timbuktu from a small desert settlement into a thriving trading centre when he stopped there on his return journey from Mecca. Timbuktu was ideally positioned on the desert frontier of the Malian Empire, against an expanse of sand the size of the continental United States, and well positioned for gold and copper traders to greet purveyors of salt, cloth, and spices.[20] Timbuktu flourished economically. However, its greatest success was not financial, but intellectual.

What Musa did there may seem mundane today, but was one of the greatest contemporary exercises in state building. He left in Timbuktu a number of the most prominent Muslim scholars of the era, freshly recruited at Mecca, and ordered the construction of the Djinguereber Mosque (still Timbuktu's most significant historical site). Musa's investment was substantial: he paid Al-Sahili 12,000 miktals, the equivalent of £1.5 million today, to build the site. In addition, Musa further developed the already-existing Sankore Mosque, which – alongside other religious centres – functioned as a university. After its refurbishment, the University of Sankore contained the largest collection of written texts since the classical library of Alexandria, and at its peak, Timbuktu had enough housing for 25,000 students.[21]

Sankore was by no means the only centre of learning in Timbuktu. There were other mosques acting as universities, and countless private libraries. Some estimate that the city was home to over one million books. Exact figures do not exist, but one famous Islamic scholar's writings survive to this day – including his diary entries, written after the plundering of his library of 1,600 books. He noted that his was one of the smallest private libraries in the city.[22]

This citadel of learning in Timbuktu worked to bond citizens of Mali together, and to weave Mali itself more tightly into the global Islamic community. Qur'anic studies were compulsory and thorough, deepening Islamic identity in the empire; not only did the practice of educating Malians in Islam work to deepen citizens' relationship with the de facto national faith, but it also functioned to further Mali's reputation in the wider Arabic world. Sidi Yaha, a travelling Arabic writer of the fourteenth century, wrote that 'scholarly efforts in Timbuktu matched and in some cases surpassed their brethren in the Islamic world.' It helped that learning Arabic and West African languages was a mandatory feature of the curriculum, binding many cultures together by facilitating the translation of their domestic conversations. Timbuktu brought many of Mali's diverse cultures into the Islamic identity that Musa envisioned for his people. It also led to an exchange programme: Musa would send some of Timbuktu's best scholars to Morocco, Egypt, Mecca and Tunisia, and, in return, received many of the era's most prominent thinkers.[23]

Although Timbuktu's education system revolved around its mosques, this obscures the diversity of subjects taught: imams educated young Muslims in history, mathematics, geography, physics, chemistry, astronomy, and business ethics. A work on grammar was produced, citing 40 other grammatical works – many locally produced, and all locally available – in its bibliography. A historical volume on the Maliki cited 23 other biographies; again, these would all have been stored – if not written – in Timbuktu. Free access to books, granted both by mosques and by private collectors, was a social obligation. Supporting education became such a status symbol that the city's wealthiest inhabitants competed to fund libraries, scholarships, and school supplies.[24] The city's educational legacy lives on. When modern graduates throw their mortarboards in celebration, they are following a tradition from Timbuktu: upon finishing their studies, medieval alumni would throw their turbans into the air as they received their diplomas.

Fig. 4: Fourteenth-century astronomy table from Timbuktu (source: Wikipedia Commons)

Crucially, the legal structures of the Malian Empire were codified in Timbuktu. Previously, Malian matters of state were transmitted by griots, oral historians and poets that stored and distributed information without the written word. The system made it quite easy for less-conscientious emperors to rule inconsistently. Musa created delineation between the courts, the law, and himself, establishing referable precedents and clearly defined legal structures. Though written laws are now a base expectation, at the time it was revolutionary – they (theoretically) ensured rights for the population, at the expense of the ruler's ability to rule by ephemeral decree. It is significantly harder for a Mansa to rule according to whim when bound by his own paper trail. Sacrificing a degree of his imperial power in order to grant greater power to the legitimacy of the state was, in the Middle Ages, not necessarily the done thing.

Timbuktu's reputation grew quickly. In 1375, it was also included in the Catalan Atlas , only 50 years after Musa's arrival. The city's legacy may have been Musa's greatest victory, though its rewards were more nebulous, multi-faceted, and durable than the gold upon which Mali had previously relied. In addition, the empire now exported thought, culture, and an imperial narrative that (according to the limited sources left to scholars) was a source of pride and identity for its citizens. It was part of Mali's cultural legacy, alongside the balaphone, terracotta sculptures, and the gold jewellery on display in the Smithsonian today.

A Sudanese proverb endures: 'salt comes from the north, gold from the south, and silver from the country of the white men, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuktu.'[25]

The Death of Mansa Musa

Perhaps Musa's greatest talent lay in his artful construction of narratives and institutions – and there may be no greater evidence for this than the way Malian history unravelled after his death. The mere fact that there is recorded history from his reign, in an era when chronicling relied upon storytelling, rumour, and reputation, is a testament to his imperial legacy. Equally telling is the fact that we have no idea how or when he died, though history's best guess, based on his final acts of diplomacy, places it around 1337.

Musa took the Malian Empire to its peak. When he died, at the end of a long period of political stability, financial dynamism, and territorial expansion, it included what is now Senegal, southern Mauritania, northern Ghana, Mali, northern Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, The Gambia, and Ivory Coast. Shortly after his death, all this began to unravel.

Communities on the empire's eastern edge began to assert their independence, and were absorbed by the Songhai; Mali was forced to cede its control of Gao and Timbuktu.[26] Political corruption undermined imperial legitimacy – a destabilisation exploited quickly by the Mossi, another neighbouring rival.[27] In 1331, a few years before Musa's likely death date, a 20-year outbreak of the Black Death struck Europe, Asia, and North Africa, further contributing to regional instability. Though it didn't reach Mali, its effect on Morocco was sufficient to derail North African trade. Mali, overstretched and overreaching, lost control over its all-important trade routes. Without the legitimacy granted by either economic might or cultural cohesion, Mali crumbled. Details are sparse, as new rulers silenced many griots (the storytellers that guard Mali's oral history) by way of conversion or execution.

Beyond Africa, a broader shift in the global balance of power took place. As the Malian Empire collapsed, so did the Aztec, the Inca, and the native cultures of North America. Portugal's currency during the invasion of the Americas was based upon gold from Mali, imported via Morocco. Europe, dependent on (and desperate for) African gold throughout the Middle Ages, now found a fresh source of wealth in the New World. Portugal's voyages took them down the African coast, to present day Ghana; there they established the Portuguese Gold Coast, a colony dedicated to extracting the precious metal from Africa sans middlemen. Musa's decision to focus on building a terrestrial empire, dissuaded by his predecessor's death at sea, may have been shortsighted: Africa would disproportionately suffer in the new world order.

The great curiosity of Mansa Musa's story is its obscurity. His wealth is hardly common historical knowledge, a far cry from the way in which the American robber barons like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie survive in popular memory. Historians have explained Musa's lesser prominence by the terminal fragility of sources documenting his reign; however, though written records and oral histories have been lost to internecine wars and cultural entropy, perhaps Musa's obscurity is better attributed to the decimation of the African continent by Europeans. The few sources that survived were subsequently buried beneath centuries of eurocentrism.

Gus Casely-Hayford writes that 'the beautiful thing about gold is it does tell the story of the powerful. It does tell the story that colonialism sought to deny, of indigenous, structured, wonderful, cultured civilizations.'[28] For the last few centuries, the popular narrative of medieval Africa has not focused upon its empires, riches, or cultural sophistication, but on its assumed primality – a whitewashing that has made the life of Mansa Musa something of an inconvenient truth.

Endnotes

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