

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Mansa Musa

### Mansa Musa and the Kingdom of Mali

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Embracing an area more than half a million square miles, the kingdom of Mali was undoubtedly one of the richest and most prosperous on earth in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Its territory touched the Atlantic Ocean to the west and extended as far as the bend in the Niger River to the east. From north to south, it embraced the entire swath of land south of the Sahara to the thick tropical forests of equatorial Africa. The kingdom was richly endowed with gold, salt, cola nuts and ivory, which were in great demand in the markets of the Mediterranean. But above all, it was endowed with gifted and far-sighted rulers like Mansa Musa.

From our perspective, the important element in Mali was that it was Muslim. This fact made it an integral part of the vast Islamic world. Trade and ideas flowed freely between Mali, North Africa, Spain, Egypt and Arabia. Muslim traders plied the desert with their caravans carrying brass work from Spain, brocades from Egypt, precious stones from India and returned with gold, salt, cola nuts and ivory. More important was the flow of ideas and scholars. Africans traveled to Mecca for Hajj and brought back books written in Baghdad, Cairo and Kairouan. Islamic jurists and *ulema* were in great demand in the learning centers of Sijilmasa, Timbaktu, Mali and Ghana. African soldiers were very much a part of Muslim armies in Spain, Egypt and India. Mali was thus a part of the Islamic mosaic contributing its wealth and its resources to the prosperity of Asia and Europe alike.

Mali is referred to in Arabic as Mallel. It was inhabited by the Mandinka who claim their descent from Bilal ibn Rabah, companion of the Prophet and the first *Muezzin* of Islam. Bilali Banuma is the name given to Bilal in the Mandinka language. Islamic influence in Mali from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards is confirmed by the oral traditions, which were the basis for much of the historical evidence in Africa, until present day scholars discovered the great libraries in Timbaktu and Jenne. Muslim historians like Ibn Hisham and Al Yaqubi (9<sup>th</sup> century), Al Bakri (11<sup>th</sup> century) and Ibn Khaldun (14<sup>th</sup> century) have recorded the penetration of Islam in the Mali region.

The initial thrust for political consolidation among the Mandinka tribes came from the discovery of gold in the mines located at Bure. Wealth, a measure of surplus human energy, is a primary engine for political centralization. Only faith, that transcendental element in collective human effort, surpasses wealth in this respect. To protect the caravans that carried gold, local hunter-associations were formed.

These were loose military groupings directed towards a common goal, namely, the protection of trade routes. It was not until the reign of Sundiata that the Mandinka forged the political union that gave birth to Mali.

Sundiata, who ruled from 1230-1255, is known in the Mandinka language as Mari-Djata. According to some sources, Sundiata was born into a Muslim family. According to others, such as Ibn Khaldun, he accepted Islam as an adult. The Mandinka were under continuous military pressure from a rival tribe, the Susus. In the year 1230, in a series of military engagements, Sundiata defeated Sumangru, king of the Susus. Following this decisive victory, the kings and chiefs of the Mandinka gathered together and swore their allegiance to Sundiata. Tradition records that Sundiata wore a Muslim dress on this historic occasion. Henceforth Islam was to provide the universal cohesive force for the Mandinka, transcending their allegiance to tribe and region. The Mali Empire was born.

Mansa Uli succeeded his father Sundiata. The word Mansa (or *Mansu*) in Mandinka means king, Uli is a local pronunciation of Ali (r). Uli extended the borders of Mali in every direction. To the north, he added the important trading centers of Walata and Timbaktu. To the east, he added Gao. To the west, he expanded into Senegal and Gambia, reaching the Atlantic Ocean. Mali thus became the owner of north-south as well as east-west trade routes and the repository of important centers of learning.

After Mansa Uli (d. 1285), Mali went through a period of turbulence over issues of succession. When the turbulence died down, Mansa Musa, perhaps the most able and best known of Mali monarchs, ascended the throne in 1307. Mansa Musa (1307-1337) consolidated the administration of the state, encouraged trade and protected trade routes. In 1324, he performed his Hajj. According to Ibn Khaldun, he took with him an entourage of 12,000. (Some writers claim his entourage was as large as 72,000). The Malians were rich and carried with them a plentiful supply of gold. They spent so much of it during their trip that the price of gold fell in North Africa and Egypt and the price of commodities increased, causing considerable inflation.

On his return from Hajj, Mansa Musa stopped off in Cairo and Kairouan, bought a large number of books and returned home accompanied by Maliki jurists, administrators and Qur'anic scholars. He richly endowed the African universities in Walata, Timbaktu and Gao, built mosques, patronized scholarship, encouraged mass education and established closer relations with the Muslim powers of North Africa and the Mamluke Sultan of Egypt, Nasiruddin Muhammed (1309-1340).

Mansa Musa is known in history as a pious man, a scholar, a generous patron and a far-sighted ruler. In chronological terms, Mansa Musa ruled less than a hundred years after the fall of Baghdad (1258) and the total destruction of Central Asia and Persia by the Mongols. In the early part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there were only three parts of the Muslim world that had any semblance of political and economic power. These were Mamluke Egypt, the Empire of Mali and the Sultanate of Delhi. Persia was just recovering under Ghazan the Great and the Ottomans were only in the nascent state of their global upsurge.

We know a great deal of the status of Islam in Mali through the writings of Ibn Batuta (1304-1377), the great world traveler, who visited the region in 1354. Ibn Batuta met the ruler of the state, stayed with the jurists and common folks alike and through his keen insight analyzed its society and its culture. According to Ibn Batuta, the Africans were punctual in their observance of *salat*, were extremely fastidious in observing rules of cleanliness and competed with each other in the giving of *zakat*. Memorizing, learning and recitation of the Qur'an were honored and encouraged. Poetry and culture flourished. And women enjoyed dignified freedom unequaled in the Islamic world at that time.

Some scholars, like Ivan Van Sertima in his book, *"They Came Before Columbus"*, have asserted that the Africans were the first to discover America. Recent research into the historical records of the period has confirmed this assertion. The historian Shihabuddin Abul Abbas Ahmed (1300-1384) describes the Mali explorations of the Atlantic Ocean in his book, *Masalik al absar fi mamalik al amsar* (Roadways for those who have sight and are searching, in the provinces of the kingdoms). Empirical evidence to support pre-Columbian contacts between Africa and America is abundant. African sculpture in the West Indies is a replica of similar work in West Africa. The ocean currents from the coast of Sene-Gambia to the Indies and the coast of Brazil would make such a journey plausible. But the mere presence of ocean currents does not bring about monumental historical events like the discovery of a continent. Such events require foresight, planning and most important, capital and material resources. Mali possessed such resources in abundance. It was so rich, in fact, that it could disturb the money supply in the Mediterranean world. It had an abundant supply of wood in the Sene-Gambia region with which to build large ships. It had tremendous human resources in a vast and far-flung empire. And its rulers were far-sighted with a global vision. If the Africans did visit the American continent, it must have been during the period of Mansa Musa.

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