

Mansa Musa, An African Builder

- Habeeb Salloum

In the annals of African history, no one has left more of an imprint on the outside world than Mansa Kankan Musa, ruler of Mali from 1312-37 A.D. Also known as Gongo Musa, he became one of the most powerful leaders of his time and was to make Mali's name renowned throughout the European and Islamic countries. Beginning in the 14th century, his name and that of Mali were to become synonymous with opulence, learning and justice.

Called by historians Musa the Magnificent, he was a very successful leader, celebrated for his enlightenment, justice and piety. Inheriting a great empire, he extended its boundaries and made his country a world power. Perhaps his greatest contribution to Mali history was the spread of its fame and prestige to other lands.

The Empire of Mali was founded by the great warrior-diplomat, Sundiata, who reigned from 1230-55 A.D., on the Mandinka plateau between the Niger and Senegal Rivers. Here, in the original home of the Mandingo people, Sundiata built his capital, Niani, at the confluence of the Niger and Sankarani Rivers. A man of foresight, he extended the country's boundaries and enforced throughout his realm, excellent law and order. More than any other ruler in his time, he encouraged agriculture, especially the cultivation of cotton and the mining of gold. His policies were to make him one of the most heroic and constructive rulers in African history.

After Sundiata's death in 1255, there was, until Mansa Musa took power in 1312, a period of confusion. At least six different rulers took power, but the only concrete achievements attributed to these sovereigns was the extension of Mali's boundaries.

When Mansa Musa took over the helm of state, he added the important towns of Timbuktu and Gao to his kingdom. However, his greatest contribution to Mali's history was the consolidation of the foundation laid by Sundiata. Subsequently, Musa's name and that of Sundiata were to dominate the history of the empire.

Known as the country's architect, Mansa Musa welded a nation, out of a huge mosaic of peoples, whose leaders for 150 years dominated the affairs of West Africa. Establishing Islam as the base for uniting the wide diversity of tribes, he championed this religion with extraordinary zeal. Mali had been nominally Muslim before his time but under his rule Islam became well established in the Royal Court and was installed as the official state religion. Thereafter, the urban centers throughout the country took on an Islamic character. It is said that the historic greatness of Mali was due to the fact that Musa placed his country firmly in the Muslim world.

Musa was famed for his piety and the building of imposing mosques, yet he never fought a religious war and applied Muslim policies with an hesitant hand. Even though he once contemplated ending his days in Mecca, Musa was no fanatic. He did not outlaw other religions and often performed the rites and ceremonies of the Mandinka faith. An Egyptian living in Mali during his reign wrote that he presided over traditional courts and often settled witchcraft cases.

In the economic, educational and political fields his policies were no less impressive. His encouragement of trade between Mali, North Africa and beyond, mostly in kola nuts, ivory, salt and, above all, gold, brought his land great prosperity.

He encouraged learning by his generous patronage of schools and Muslim scholars. He also sent students to study in Fez and other famous centers of knowledge. His encouragement of education attracted intellectuals from the other Islamic countries and made Timbuktu one of the foremost centers of Islamic scholarship in the world.

Above all, Mansa Musa's famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 spread Mali's renown and prestige, not only in the Islamic countries but to the far corners of medieval Europe. In his train, as he travelled eastward, were 60,000 courtiers and servants, richly dressed, and 80 camels each carrying some 300 pounds of gold. Wherever his train halted on a Friday, he paid for the erection of a mosque. Everywhere he went, he became legendary for his generosity and the extravagant spending of his entourage.

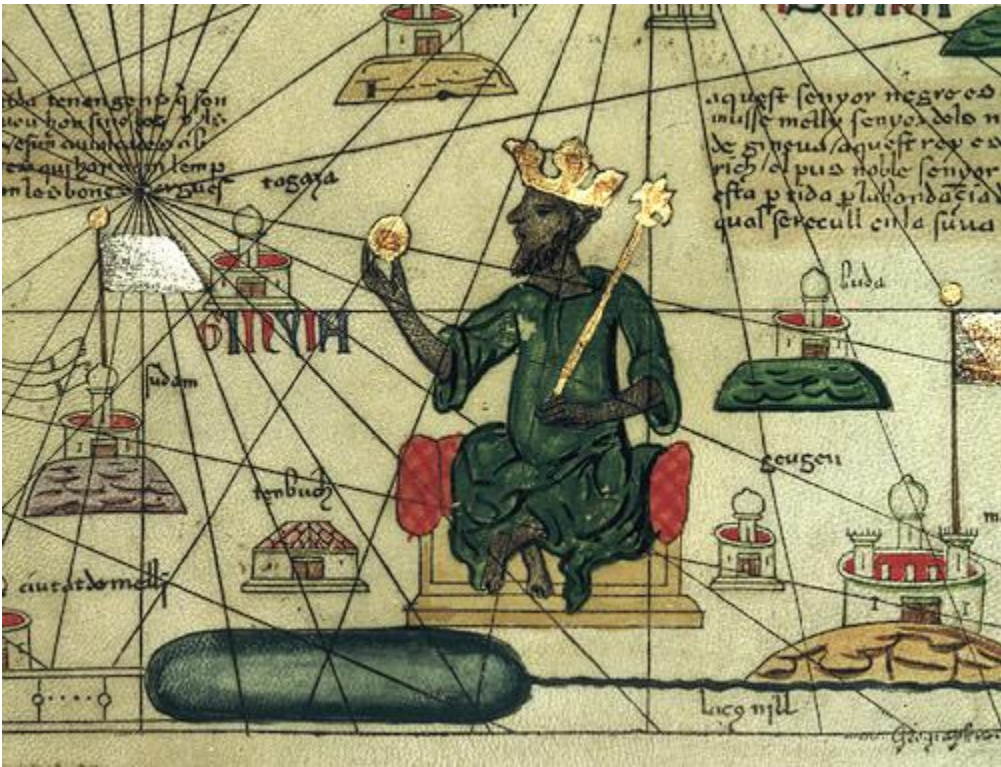
Stopping in Cairo, one of the greatest cities in the world of that era, he left a strong impression because of his generous gifts and expenditures. His spending of millions of dollars caused the value of gold in Egypt to be devalued. Ibn al-Iyas, an Egyptian of the 16th century, mentioned Musa's visit to Cairo in 1324 as the most outstanding event of that year.

Other West African rulers had gone on pilgrimage before him but none had travelled on such a lavish scale. He gave so much in charity and gifts that on his return journey he had to borrow gold from a Cairo merchant. Musa's visit to Cairo and the wealth he displayed had one far-reaching effect. It stimulated the interest by Egyptian traders in commerce with West Africa.

On his return from Mecca, Musa was accompanied by an Andalusia-Muslim architect-scholar, Es-Saheli who introduced into Mali a new development in architecture, especially in the building of mosques and palaces. He brought into Malian construction burnt bricks, the flat roofs of North Africa and the pyramidal minaret, all which were to become the vogue throughout the empire. After this famed pilgrimage, Mali reached the peak of its prosperity and prominence. Ambassadors were exchanged with Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and other countries. The inhabitants of its capital Niani were described by the Moroccan traveler Leo Africanus as the most civilized, intelligent and respected of all the peoples of West Africa.

At Musa's death in 1337, Mali's influence extended from the Atlantic in the west to Hausaland in the east. The southern boundaries reached the forest belt and to the north, the heart of the Sahara. Ibn Batuta, a renowned Moroccan writer-traveler, who visited Mali some 12 years after Musa's death, reported that security and a general sense of justice were to be found in every corner of that vast kingdom.

Perhaps, no other writer has paid tribute to Mansa Musa, the greatest contributor to Mali's history, better than the North African scholar Al-Omari. A few years after Musa visited Cairo, Al-Omari wrote that in all of West Africa he was, 'the most powerful, the richest, the most fortunate, the most feared by his enemies and the most able to do good for those around him.'



Kingdom of Mali

Primary Source Documents

The following description of the visit to Cairo in 1324 by the King of Mali, Mansa Musa, was written by Al-Umari, who visited Cairo several years after the Mansa Musa's visit.

al-Umari, 1300 – 1384) was an Arab historian who visited Cairo shortly after the Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca

From the beginning of my coming to stay in Egypt I heard talk of the arrival of this sultan Musa on his Pilgrimage and found the Cairenes eager to recount what they had seen of the Africans' prodigal spending. I asked the emir Abu...and he told me of the opulence, manly virtues, and piety of his sultan. "When I went out to meet him {he said} that is, on behalf of the mighty sultan al-Malik al-Nasir, he did me extreme honour and treated me with the greatest courtesy. He addressed me, however, only through an interpreter despite his perfect ability to speak in the Arabic tongue. Then he forwarded to the royal treasury many loads of unworked native gold and other valuables. I tried to persuade him to go up to the Citadel to meet the sultan, but he refused persistently saying: "I came for the Pilgrimage and nothing else. I do not wish to mix anything else with my Pilgrimage." He had begun to use this argument but I realized that the audience was repugnant to him because he would be obliged to kiss the ground and the sultan's hand. I continue to cajole him and he continued to make excuses but the sultan's protocol demanded that I should bring him into the royal presence, so I kept on at him till he agreed.

When we came in the sultan's presence we said to him: 'Kiss the ground!' but he refused outright saying: 'How may this be?' Then an intelligent man who was with him whispered to him something we could not understand and he said: 'I make obeisance to God who created me!' then he prostrated himself and went forward to the sultan. The sultan half rose to greet him and sat him by his side. They conversed together for a long time, then sultan Musa went out. The sultan sent to him several complete suits of honour for himself, his courtiers, and all those who had come with him, and saddled and bridled horses for himself and his chief courtiers....

This man [Mansa Musa] flooded Cairo with his benefactions. He left no court emir nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold. The Cairenes made incalculable profits out of him and his suite in buying and selling and giving and taking. They exchanged gold until they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its price to fall." ...

Gold was at a high price in Egypt until they came in that year. The mithqal did not go below 25 *dirhams* and was generally above, but from that time its value fell and it cheapened in price and has remained cheap till now. The mithqal does not exceed 22 *dirhams* or less. This has been the state of affairs for about twelve years until this day by reason of the large amount of gold which they brought into Egypt and spent there. ...

<http://www.history.com/classroom/unesco/timbuktu/mansamoussa.html>

<http://www.africanevents.com/Essay-Habeeb-MansaMusa.htm>

http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/materials/handouts/k_o_mali.html