

Resource Mismanagement and the Decline of the Mali Empire

The mighty Mali Empire fell, probably, as a result of dwindling political power, resulting from the economic bankruptcy of the empire through extravagant spending. The process of the decline of the empire has been stated and restated by many scholars. Numerous published works on the Mali Empire point to the fact that the collapse of the empire in the 15th-century had its foundations in a weakened political platform, restructured social organization, and crumbled economies. The harbingers of these menaces that befell the empire, as I suggest, are mismanagement of resources and lavish spending. This loose uncoordinated spending, especially on religious activities, has been documented prior to the time of the collapse of the empire. According to historical records and as detailed below, since the 14th century and after the adoption of Islam as the "official religion" of Mali, her leaders owed Islam a high esteem and spent a lot to observe, propagate, and maintain the religion's obligations—one of which is to visit and pray at Mecca—and legacies. This mirrors the importance and influence of Islam on the people of Mali, especially the royal lineage, which had lasting impacts on the society, politics, and economy of the empire.

Against the conventional wisdom that sees the fall of an empire as the end of its existence, both physically and ideologically, one could observe that at the fall of the Malian empire, the polity, rather than going into oblivion, experienced "political fragmentation"[1] resulting in the formation of other polities such as the Songhai in the mid-15th century. In this paper, therefore, I first give an overview of the empire of Mali and its location, sources of its history, and ascension to power. I then briefly discuss the debate on the issue of the decline of the empire. Finally, I dwell on how and why the Mali Empire fell, with evidence from diverse sources.

The ancient Malian empire was situated in the region historically called western Sudan. This region occupies the areas from the west of the Sudan to the Atlantic on the western coast of Africa. This stretch of land is known to be historically important particularly during the medieval period. The popularity of the region is not only in the fact that many empires sprung from it from the 9th to 17th centuries, but also because it was a viable trade corridor which linked sub-Saharan Africa to the North African market economic system and the Arabian world. But Mali was not the first empire in the western Sudan. The Soninke people prior to the 11th century founded the Ghana empire in the region. Although the date of the founding of Ghana is uncertain, there has been an argument that the empire of Ghana was an aftermath of earlier kingdom probably prior to the ninth century CE.[2] The reason for Ghana's strength was its location in the southern terminus of the Sahel and at the edge of the gold field in the north of West Africa. The control of this route and trade made the people powerful; thus the empire became affluent. Despite being in control of trade at that time Ghana lacked military power, and thus Mali took advantage of this and conquered the kingdom.

The conquering of Ghana by Mali is an important episode in West African history. This was not only because Mali had a strong garrison of generals, but also because West Africa became known to the world and left an indelible print on the world's economic system, especially in parts of the Arab world, such as Egypt and Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia. This impact of Mali in the Arab world has been well documented in historical texts, particularly the records of Arab scholars who traveled to Africa from the 10th through 17th centuries. However, as important as the texts are, they did not document the foundation of the empire. All we can glean from them are the heyday of the empire; hence the source for the foundation of Mali mainly comes from oral history and archaeology. I now turn to the discussion on the pathway to Mali's development.

The foundation of the empire of Mali is credited to Sundiata Keita, who went from being a fugitive to a mighty emperor who had control of a large military force. When Sundiata's forces were on the way to attack the forces of Sumanguru, Sumanguru describe the force as a "mountain of stone." [3] According to legend, Sumanguru was Sundiata's stepbrother and party to his exile. Sumanguru had prevailed over parts of the fragmented Ghana kingdom. He was in control of Kumbi Saleh and the caravan route, and to him tribute and taxes were paid; however, his rule was despotic.[4] After the success of the attack on Sumanguru, the foundation of the empire of Mali was laid and Sundiata became the first *mansa* (king of kings) in the 12th century CE.

Many scholars have echoed the richness and wealth of the Mali Empire from the 13th century, yet the military that formed its base, and perhaps the reason for its being wealthy receive little attention. The political strength of Mali was comparable to none in the whole of western Sudan. Fage[5] suggests that it was the wealth of Mali that provided political and military power for the empire. A cursory look at the existing literature on Mali history shows the reverse. What is evident is that Mali had already constituted a strong political structure and military force before the empire was able to take over the control of trade in the western Sudan. In his book *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, historian Djibril Niane narrates Sundiata's attack first on Sosso and later on Diaghan and other cities.[6] Niane narrates that Sundiata grouped his army into three. His garrison generals, Faloli Koroma and Fran Karama, headed the first and the second groups. These groups were sent to wage war against and claim Bambougou and Fouta respectively. The emperor himself (Sundiata) is said to have headed the third platoon to attack the city of Kita. At the end of Sundiata's conquest expedition, his authority had spread far and wide in the western Sudan "from Ghana in the north to Mali in the south and from Mema in the east to the Fouta in the west." [7]

This conquest and the establishment of Mali incorporated many kingdoms with rich resources, including the rich gold-producing area of the former empire of Ghana, under one political power. Among the kingdoms and chiefdoms conquered by Mali are Takrur, Bambugu, Dia, Gao, Sanagana, Sanhadja, Godala, and Niani with Ghana and Mema as allied kingdoms. Thus the mighty empire comprised varied people, which included the Berber, the Tuareg, the Fulbe, the Soninke, the Songhai, the Dongo, and the Mande among others. Although they were of "different cultures" with perhaps different traditional religions, they were "united" by Islam. The political structure was federated with governors and local chiefs appointed by the king to be in charge of each province. Each clan or group was given a different role in the government. For instance, the Mandenka garrisons were deployed to principal provinces to ensure security and tranquility. Also, the royal family, the allies, and the generals were in control of the resources and trade in the empire across Mali's territories. Among the goods that Mali traded were gold and salt and, later, slaves. The capital of Mali was seated at Niani, which Sundiata transformed into an important financial and trading center. Niani was also rich in ore deposits and was a base of iron production. Archaeological investigations in the ancient city have revealed evidence of intense iron production in Niani. However, Conard[8] has contested the legitimacy of Niani as the capital of the empire of Mali. He argues, based on the accounts of oral tradition, that Dakajalan was likely to have been the capital of ancient Mali from the 13th through 16th centuries, where most political decisions and other important event took place.[9] Archaeological investigations at the inland Niger Delta region of Mali reveal that there was no centralization in the early Mande trading center. The center of power varied during phases of Mali history.[10] Conversely, one could suggest that there was no one centralized capital during the time of the ancient Mali. The leader may have chosen different center for different activities (e.g. Niani as industrial or trade center and Dakajalan as administrative center).

The reputation Mali had accorded herself during its early days as a western Sudan empire was much greater in the 14th century. In fact, scholars have suggested the 14th century as the apogee of the empire of Mali. Mali had a "great standing army, which could put 200,000 men on a battlefield in a matter of days." [11] Of course many *mansas* had come and gone between the time of the foundation of the empire until the 14th century. The most popular among them all was Mansa Musa, who reigned between 1312 and 1337. Dozen of books have been written about his reign, wealth, and most importantly his extravagant pilgrimage to Mecca. Al-Umari, one of the Arab scholars that had the privilege to interview Mansa Musa, describes Mansa Musa as "the wealthiest, the most feared, and the most powerful emperor of his day." [12] The success of Mansa Musa was the combination of the sustenance of a strong military and control over the management of the economic base of the empire. Also, the adoption of Islam as the official religion of the empire granted Mansa Musa smoother "diplomatic relations" with the Islamic world and opened up the market for Mali, although Islam had been introduced earlier in the region.[13]

Mansa Musa expanded the empire tremendously, established educational institutions, and transformed the ancient empire's wealth into monuments and commodities more valuable than gold.[14] New imposing architecture such as palaces, mosques, and schools were built across Mali's provinces. Archaeological investigations in the Gao region have revealed a mosque structure and a cemetery with tombstones. The Arabic inscription on some engraved steles, one of which bore a date of 766 H/1364 CE, has led Mauny[15] to suggest that since the structure is dated to the 14th century it is likely that the mosque was built in 1324 by Mansa Musa, upon returning from his flamboyant pilgrimage to Mecca. Recent archaeological excavations in Gao have also revealed a massive structure which is believed to be one of the earliest royal palaces at Gao, although it is uncertain whether the palace was built by Mansa Musa.[16]

Musa did not only introduce monumental architecture and expand the financial base of Mali, but also "brought stability and good governance." [17] Ibn Battuta commended the state of the security of the empire: when travelling the roads of Mali, one need not fear thief or usurper. [18]

By the 15th century, about two centuries after the demise of Mansa Musa, the fame of Mali began to dwindle. The unraveling of the empire was so severe that the *mansas* could not ameliorate the situation. How could an empire of such magnificent affluence a couple of centuries ago go down so suddenly? The answer to this is not farfetched. It is directly linked to the previous lavish spending of the *mansas*, although this has not been well-echoed by scholars of West African medieval history. One could suggest that the economic bankruptcy had a "ripple effect" on the political institution, which resulted in a weakened military compared to what was initially obtainable in the empire. The implication of this was that Mali was unable to maintain a large army, and thus orders were boycotted, groups broke off, and centers/cities were captured.

On political grounds Fage [19] argues that early 15th-century Mali's military power was weak and the empire was on the threshold of collapsing with some of its provinces already captured by the Tuareg. Many scholars have taken this viewpoint.

Although the staggering economic situation in the empire at this time was mentioned, it was not seen as major factor in the fall of the empire of Mali. The richness was not only noted in the amount of the traded goods at Mali's disposal, but also in the level of spending of her *mansas* from the late 13th century. This is well-recorded by the early Arab travelers in the region and has become the center of focus of the history of Mali. Long before the reign of Mansa Musa, there had been records of the visits of *mansas* to the holy city of Mecca with outrageous spending during the voyages. The most popular pilgrimage of Malian *mansas*, and perhaps the one with the most extravagant spending, was that of Mansa Musa. Al Umari writes about the opulence of Mansa Musa's entourage on hajj. His entourage included over 60,000 soldiers, 12,000 servants, 500 servants for his wife, another 500 servants walking in front of Musa with gold staves in their hands, and 100 camel-loads of gold. Their layover in Cairo had a lasting impact on the economy of the city, especially on the gold market, which lost its value as a result of the infiltration of Musa's abundant gold in the city. Musa spent so lavishly that, on his return trip to Mali, he overspent and had to borrow from one of the Cairo merchants with over 200% interest. The merchant reportedly "made 700 dinars over 300." [20] Musa was also paying in gold to the Islamic scholars he brought from Cairo to teach in Mali.

The prodigious spending of Mali's *mansas* was also recorded during the reign of Mansa Mari Diata after the death of Mansa Musa, although there were *mansas* Magha and Suleyman before Djata. Ibn Khaldun notes that it was Djata who ruined the empire by squandering its treasure. Djata is described as a "profligate king." [21]

From the preceding, it is not an overstatement to say that it was the culmination of the extravagant spending over decades that led to the initial dwindling of the empire, which resulted in what Asante [22] called "neighborly disrespect." According to the record of how lavish some of the *mansas* were, some provinces under the rule of Mali whose inhabitants paid tribute to the emperor grew distasteful of the wasteful spending and needed liberation. We should not forget, on the other hand, that the leaders of these provinces were generals; some were the descendants of Sundiata's army. The people believed that their resources and economy could be better managed if they were on their own. Hence there was rebellion, agitation, and breakage. This created a lapse in the political structure, which gave the Tuareg and Mossi people in the north and south respectively the long-awaited opportunity to take control of Mali's most productive and important cities. By the end of the 15th century, the Tuareg had attacked and took over Timbuktu—the great city of trade and commerce and seat of the intellectuals and holy men; Gao and Jenne—the market cities; and Walata—the commercial city. While the people of Takkur, especially the Wolof, threw off their subjection to Mali, the Mossi consistently threatened the southern cities, [23] perhaps without strong resistance from the Malian army.

At this period, the diplomatic relations that Mali formerly enjoyed with Egypt, Syria, and Morocco must have been severed. Historical records reveal that when Mali could not bear the monumental loss of its centers/provinces to the Tuareg and Mossi, it sought support from the Portuguese. Unfortunately the Portuguese did not aid Mali. All of these scenarios harbingered the fall of the great empire of Mali, which manifested at the end of the 15th-century in the form of political disintegration. The fragmented polities later coalesced to form as the mightier Songhai Empire.

On a closing note, I would like to state that the process of power change and formation of an empire in western Sudan, from Ghana to Mali to Songhai, supports the argument against the uncritical use of the terms "fall and collapse" as these have been used, until recently, in anthropology and history. Such terms not only "imply that some meaningful entity cease to exist"[24] but also ignore the kind of social continuum that exist in human society. It should be noted that I have not attempted here ostensibly to disprove the political angle of the decline of an empire. As stated by Yoffee,[25] "political fragmentation is concomitant with social, economic, ideological, and/or environmental troubles." This is well-demonstrated in empire of Mali, as the once-strong empire did not die out completely but dwindled and regenerated in another form. The process that therefore led to the fall of the empire began with economic bankruptcy, which is strongly connected to the loss of confidence in the ruling of its leaders by the inhabitants, to political fragmentation, and to the eventual formation of a "new" polity.

Notes:

[1] N. Yoffee, "Orientating Collapse." In *The Collapse of Ancient States and Civilizations*, ed. N. Yoffee and G. L. Cowgill, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 15.

[2] P. J. Munson, "Archaeology and Prehistoric Origin of the Ghana Empire." *The Journal of African History* 21, no. 4, 457–466.

[3] B. Davidson, *West Africa Before the Colonial Era: A History to 1850* (London: Longman, 1998), 39.

[4] Ibid., 38–40.

[5] J. D. Fage, *A History of West Africa* (Hampshire, UK: Gregg Revivals, 1992), 21.

[6] D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman, 1965), 59–72.

[7] Ibid., 72.

[8] D. C. Conard, "A Town Called Dakajalan: The Sunjata Tradition and the Question of Ancient Mali's Capital." *The Journal of African History* 35, no. 3 (1994): 355–377.

[9] Ibid., 372–6.

[10] S. K. McIntosh and R. J. McIntosh, "The Early Cities in West Africa: Towards an Understanding." *African Archaeological Review* 11 (1984): 73–94.

[11] M. K. Asante, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Internal Harmony* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 132.

[12] Ibid., 135.

[13] T. Insoll, "Islam, Archaeology, and History: Gao Region (Mali) ca. AD 900–1250." *Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology* 39 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series 647, 1996).

[14] S. Drake, *Empires of Early Africa*. Videorecording produced by Tapestry International Productions, Ltd. for the Discovery Channel, Discovery School. (Silver Spring, MD: Discovery Education, 2005).

[15] R. Mauny, "Note d'Archéologie au sujet de Gao." *IFAN* (1951): 844; —, "Tableau Géographique de l'Ouest Africain au Moyen Age d'après les sources écrites, la tradition et l'archéologie." *IFAN* (1961): 492.

[16] S. Takezawa and M. Cisse, "Discovery of the Earliest Royal Palace in Gao and its Implications for the History of West Africa." Unpublished document, National Cultural Patrimony (Bamako, Mali, 2007).

[17] See note 11 above, 135.

[18] N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), 296.

[19] See note 5 above, 26.

[20] J. O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhai Empire* (Boston: Brill, 1999), 10; see note 18 above, 269; see note 11 above, 134.

[21] See note 18 above, 336.

[22] See note 11 above, 136.

[23] See note 3 above, 44.

[24] See note 1 above, 14.

[25] See note 1 above, 15.

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