Ray Kea

The Fall of the Mali Empire

The Mali Empire fell in the 15th century. Its decline and collapse coincided with the rise of the Middle Niger-based Songhai (Songhay; Sonrai) Empire under the rule of the Sunni dynasty between 1464 and 1492. What factors and circumstances brought about the downfall of Mali when, as a 17th-century Timbuktu chronicler wrote, "the Malians enjoyed tremendous power and extraordinary might" for more than two centuries? Stretching across the entire southern Saharan, steppe, and savanna zones of West Africa, Mali is said to have had an estimated population of 40 to 50 million in the 14th century. The residents of its capital Niani exceeded 100,000. At its height as well as in the time of its demise, the empire was a world of many levels of activity and organization. At one level the imperial collapse can be viewed as a crisis or a series of crises in the political-administrative structure and the Upper Niger socio-economic core zone. At another level it can be understood as a specific manifestation of systemic trends, long-term regularities (continuities), and ruptures (discontinuities) in West Africa's *longue durée*. At still another spatial scale the empire's fall may be attributed to material and social forces and processes associated with different phases of globalization in the medieval world economy. Of course, these forces and processes would have been mediated by specific, historically situated local institutions within the Mali cultural, economic, and political system.

For analytical purposes, the history of imperial Mali can be divided into three phases. Their distinctive characteristics are presented schematically below.

Phase one—conquest and colonization (ca. 1230–ca. 1290): wars of territorial expansion; founding of a new capital (Niani); creation of an imperial administration based on hereditary aristocracy; creation of different kinds of status groups (royal slave guards, artisanal castes, farming slaves, "river people"); political unification of gold-mining areas and key centers of exchange; establishment of Islam as the state religion; reclamation of new lands for farming the creation of agricultural; construction of river ports to serve gold mining areas; development of boat-building and fishing technologies; introduction of hydraulic works (dams and canals); expansion of Wangara and Masufa trade networks; Niger River assumes two roles: a military-political road (domain of the state) and a commercial route (domain of merchants).

Phase two—consolidation (ca. 1290–ca. 1400): appointed state functionaries supersede hereditary elite; creation of a slave military aristocracy; creation of specialized craft/labor groups as royal work force; creation of military fiefs (landed estates); continued colonization of farmland, including intensive development of food crop complexes (legumes and rice) and rearing of livestock; construction of river ports along the Middle Niger floodplain; Islamization of the aristocracy and towns; spread of initiation societies in the countryside; increased taxation of peasantry; growing political influence of Muslim clerics (creation of self-governing clerical towns); stationing of military garrisons in principal cities and desert oases; building of fortifications.

Phase three—fragmentation and crisis (ca. 1400–1460s): rebellion; demographic displacement; political decentralization; Islamization of the countryside through the development of *maraboutism* (Islamic mysticism); internal migrations.

The ascendency of Mali was characterized by a new ruling class dynamic comprising military, merchant, and clerical elements; a higher degree of social division of labor; reliance on warfare; and new cultural, institutional, ideological, and technological formations. During the period of consolidation the stability of the gold-cowrie-copper currency facilitated the expansion of internal trade, markets, and monetary transactions. Linked to this process was the growth of centers and peripheries of technical and social innovation and economic specialization in the Upper and Middle Niger basins. The boundaries between areas of innovation and specialization formed "frontiers" shifting across time and space. In addition, locales in these areas could be differentiated by economies of scale in mining, metallurgy, and agriculture. The Upper Niger core zone of Mali represented an integrated regional or sub-regional bloc of innovation and specialization that dates from the 10th century. In the first half of the 15th century another regional or sub-regional zone of innovation and specialization, the Middle Niger basin, succeeded it. Dominated politically by the Sunni dynasty (1464–1492) and its successor the Askiya dynasty (1492–1591), the Middle Niger basin became a foundation for a new geopolitical reality and new social-cultural identities as well as new social-political horizons.

Mali was connected to the wider medieval world economy and its processes of globalization via the circulation of trading capital and a complex system of northern African caravan networks. Imperial Mali was strategically positioned within this economy. Under the Keita dynasty, it participated fully at the center of the Muslim world economy, for example exporting gold ingots to North Africa via Sijilmasa (Morocco) and gold bars and gold coins to Egypt. Indeed, there is every indication, according to one study, that the central and western half of the medieval world economy, specifically that part west of the Straits of Malacca, depended to a considerable extent on African gold. Mali's dominant position in the medieval world economy was, in part, a consequence of an "industrial diaspora," which caused the foci of silver and gold production to shift from Central Asia to Europe and Africa between ca. 930 and ca.1125. Technological developments in the mining and processing of gold turned West Africa/Mali into the biggest producer of high quality gold in the medieval world. Commercial flows of precious metals between Latin Christendom and northern Africa contributed to the creation of a single Afro-European bullion market between 1125 and1225. This market, centered on the Mediterranean zone, fuelled a new international economy that lasted for three centuries (ca.1225–ca.1550).

Global flows of Malian gold from the 13th to the 15th century period were made possible by high productivity, competitive prices, efficient procurement structures and networks, widely dispersed merchant networks, and networks of alliance and allegiance. From the 13th to the early 15th century, the Niani-Walata-Taghaza commercial axis was the main caravan route that tied West Africa's gold fields to North Africa. Malian merchants, especially the Wangara and the Masufa, were prestigious allies and clients of the ruling Keita dynasty. They benefited greatly from the international gold trade, establishing by the 14th century houses of business in commercial centers like Fustat-Cairo (Egypt) and Jeddah (Arabia). During the reign of Sultan Muhammad Keita (ca.1303–1312), Mali initiated a new commercial development in the early 14th century, namely a policy of Atlantic exploration based on the gold trade.

How did imperial Mali strengthen its position within the medieval world economy and the gold-silver bullion market? How did the Keita dynasty consolidate internal economic, political, and social resources? The Mali state system was not a unitary totality bounded in territorial or social space like a nation-state formation but comprised multiple overlapping and intersecting power and interaction networks. The imperial system had two interrelated political-administrative features. One was bureaucratic, being defined by the royal appointment of officials to various imperial offices. The second was a system of allegiances and alliances centered on the capital Niani and secondary administrative centers. In his description of Mali, the Egyptian al-Umari mentions Mali's 24 towns or centers of population, each with dependent territories. The 17th-century chronicle *Tarikh as-Sudan* provides a good idea of the scale of the Malian imperial system. It relates that in the 14th century the empire had 24 provinces and 400 towns.

Each town and its territory/province would have been under the authority of an appointed functionary and at the same time each town and territory/province would have been bound to the capital Niani and the royal court by relations of alliance (as allies or clients) and/or relations of allegiance (as clients, vassals, or tributaries). In his account of Mali, Ibn Khaldun makes it clear that the dominion of the Keita dynasty extended to all the towns of the Sahara which one called "the gardens" or oases (*al-malastin*). This reference indicates that the Malian system of alliances and allegiances extended deep into the desert, certainly as far as the northern Saharan oasis-towns of Wargla and Ghadames.

The ruling dynasty's power was economic and territorial, that is to say claims over relations of trade, gift exchange, taxation, and revenue appropriation were intertwined with claims to territorial governance. State functionaries and networks of alliances and allegiances secured control over culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse population and secured access to different kinds of resource (or social wealth) within the imperial geopolitical sphere. Underpinning the networks was a socio-cultural and symbolic system which integrated the population into a web of ideological and cultural relations and mythical family relationships within which peasant fields, markets, river ports, goldfields, royal courts, mosques, shrines, and administrative centers had their designated places. Furthermore, the vast and diverse cultural space of Mali was organized in such a way that the only "fundamental" groups in the imperial system were the great aristocratic families. Within the frame of the imperial ideology of alliances, allegiances, ritual hierarchies, and cultural relations these families were "assigned" authority over local populations who were ideologically and ritually designated status groups of servants, slaves, vassals, clients, and allies and who were attached in varied ways to different interacting networks within the empire.

The breakdown of the system of alliances and allegiances and the bureaucratic apparatus can be traced to several developments. The most important, historically, was the transfer of socio-economic and socio-political power from an Upper Niger core historical bloc to a Middle Niger core historical bloc. In the course of the 15th century the rising Songhai principality, with its heartland centered on the Middle Niger floodplain, displayed an institutional and ideological capacity to build an alternate hegemonic formation that effectively destroyed the imperial suzerainty of the Keita dynasty. The rest of the present discussion considers the reasons behind this transformation.

Theoretically, all landed property ("natural habitat") in Mali was "owned" by the Malian sultan. Ownership of land by separate individuals or households was not legally formalized. From the perspective of historical analysis, land—whether forest, farmland, or goldfields—can be conceived as a social commons (a "commons of external nature"). That is to say, the great plain of the Upper Niger basin was a public space or a public property accessible to high and low alike. Three socio-economic processes were at work in the 13th and 14th centuries, two of which contributed to the expropriation of the commons. One process involved the expropriation of the commons for the purpose of creating royal farming colonies or estates worked by slave labor. Related to this process was the formation of 24 tribute-paying, servile groups (*zanj*) in permanent service to the ruler. They were engaged in a wide range of economic and service activities. The estates and the *zanj* collectives expanded and reinforced the economic base of the Keita dynasty. The third process involved the creation of military fiefs or *iqtas*. Rulers transferred tracts of the great common lands to slave guards and soldiers, primarily to reduce royal military expenditure by distributing the expense among a new class of landholders. In the Malian heartland the countryside had to contend with opposing social and religious elements: (1) non-Muslim free communal people (peasants) farming the commons; (2) enslaved cultivators, usually Muslims, working on royal or dynastic estates; (3) dependent communal people, Muslim and non-Muslim, cultivating military fiefs; and (4) Muslim fief-holders, with their own military forces, extracting food rent from their peasant dependents. Paradoxically, the appropriation of common lands led in some cases to the creation of a new (or secondary) commons, specifically the commons of culture, or socialized forms of "cognitive capital," such as mosques (religious worship) and Koranic schools (education).

The military fief system introduced a new dynamic in the Upper Niger basin. From an imperial point of view, it marked the decentralization of surplus wealth appropriation from the countryside, and this development was a principal source of political fragmentation in the heartland. As a new aristocracy, the fief-holders enjoyed relative autonomy vis-á-vis the ruling dynasty and the imperial state system. Some landowners set themselves up as independent and hereditary lords, thus this property-owning class contributed to the political fragmentation of the heartland into *iqta*-based lordships and principalities.

Another process at work in the military fief system was the growing dominance of agrarian relations over the mercantile mode: the fief was thought of as an income in kind received for military service rendered and not as an asset which could be a source of money based on commodity production. A 17th-century Timbuktu chronicle points to the kind of moral economy that the military fief-system engendered. It reports that fief-holders were tyrannical and high-handed toward their dependents and were violators of their rights. Peasant resistance to *iqta*-holders led to uprisings and, in some cases, to the migration of artisans and others from the countryside to the Middle Niger basin or even toward the Atlantic coast. Rebellions in the goldfields and on the royal and military estates were continuous phenomena in the 15th and 16th centuries. Facing revolts, secessions, instability, and political disaffection, the ruling dynasty was in no position to engage rebellious tributaries in the Middle Niger basin or in the southern Sahara. In fact, in the first half of the 15th century, state functionaries were withdrawn from cities like Walata, Timbuktu, and Tadmakka. At the same time, the imperial system of alliances and allegiances broke down as new alliances and allegiances were forged by erstwhile allies, clients, and other imperial dependents.

Further changes of import pertain to the reorientation of the principal trans-Saharan caravan routes. Trade routes leading to Sijilmasa (Morocco) and Ifriqiya (Tunisia) lost their economic significance compared to trade routes linked to Egypt. With this development Niani was virtually cut off from Saharan commercial networks and markets and hence the Mediterranean gold-silver bullion market. These developments can be attributed to the actions and decisions of Masufa merchants who severed their alliance relationship with the Keita dynasty and reoriented and reorganized their Saharan trade networks and virtually ceased sending their caravan trade to Niani. They now ruled Taghaza, the great Saharan salt mining center, Walata the leading trade center in West Africa in the 13th and 14th centuries, and from 1433 until 1467 they were the de facto rulers of Timbuktu. They invested heavily in the southern Saharan city of Takadda (Azelik), a former tributary or client of Mali and an important copper producing and commercial center as well as a center of Islamic scholarship. In the 15th century, Takedda's trans-Saharan trade focused entirely on Egypt and trade with other parts of North Africa was virtually non-existent. In addition, the Masufa founded the southern Saharan city of Agades, most of whose trans-Saharan commerce was directed towards Egypt rather than North Africa. By the mid-15th century Agades, which had links to Middle Niger basin cities, had become a leading export market for West African gold and before the end of the century it functioned as one of the foremost craft and Muslim intellectual centers in West Africa and the Islamic world.

Wangara merchants, who were Mali's most important long-distance merchants, also reorganized and reoriented their caravan trade. Many were based in the cities of the Middle Niger basin. By the late 14th century a single trade and craft center had taken shape in the Middle Niger basin along an urban axis stretching from Jenne to Kukiya, a distance of more than a thousand kilometers. In the course of the 15th century, the trans-Saharan trade generated by the cities of this axis was increasingly directed towards Egypt. With its concentration of productive and trading capital, the Middle Niger basin was a thriving area of innovation and specialization (gold mining, agriculture, metallurgy, leatherware, terracotta, and textile production). It emerged as a West Africa's most important socio-economic and socio-political center. Urban-dwelling Wangara traders, brokers, and moneylenders in the Middle Niger basin transferred their allegiance from the Keita dynasty to the rising Sunni dynasty of Songhai, becoming in the process the Songhai dynasty's principal financiers in its wars against Mali.

Another momentous change in West Africa can be attributed to the activities of Wangara mercantile groups. The 15th century is conventionally regarded by West African historians as the beginning of transformations in the Chad basin, specifically in the Hausa city-state sultanates and the Borno Sultanate. The transformations included new developments in agricultural and livestock production, craft industries, and mining. The area offered opportunities for profitable investment with the diversification of economic activities in the Chad basin, especially in Hausa and Borno cities. Middle Niger-based Wangara merchants, brokers, and moneylenders migrated to the area and their activities and investments connected the economies of Hausa and Borno cities with the commercial sector of Middle Niger cities like Jenne, Timbuktu, and Gao. They introduced the Middle Niger monetary system, based on gold and cowrie shells, to the Hausa cities thereby monetizing their economies. Other Wangara merchants, those who resided in Jenne but conducted their trade in the goldfields of the Voltaic basin to the south redirected their trade in the 15th century. Instead of sending gold to Niani, their caravans transported gold to Kano and Katsina, two principal Hausa cities. Both cities became important international trading centers in the course of the 15th century and Agades became a major commercial center within the burgeoning Hausa-Borno urban economy.

The Chad basin represented a new regional bloc of intense urbanization and technological innovation and economic specialization (agriculture; crafts; mining of gold, iron ore, and tin; and commerce). Its political economy can be considered a structural extension of the Middle Niger axial economy. Wangara mercantile and artisanal groups can be credited with initiating massive transformations in the Chadian regional bloc. The Middle Niger-Chadian macro-regional bloc was integral to the Mediterranean bullion market but this was no longer the case with the Upper Niger bloc. Imperial Mali was no more. Although early 16th-century Niani was recognized by contemporaries as a large and important city of merchants, artisans, markets, Muslim scholars, schools, and colleges, it was no longer the political capital of a dominant empire but merely the main center of a federation of principalities and fiefdoms.

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About the Author

Ray Kea

Ray Kea is a professor of African History at the University of California, Riverside, having taught previously at Johns Hopkins University, Carleton College, and St. Olaf College. His area of specialty is West Africa and Ghana between the 15th and 19th centuries, and he focuses primarily on economic, social, and cultural issues. Kea is the author of *Settlement, Trade, and Polities in the Seventeenth Century Gold Coast*, among other works.

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