

## Richard Hull

### The West African Empire of Mali: Decline and Fall

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Mali, which literally means "where the king resides," was one of medieval Africa's greatest empires and one of the best known to the outside world at the time. It extended from the edge of the Sahara southward across West Africa's Sahelian region and broad savanna to the forest fringes. It included most of the Gambia and the Middle Niger River valleys and embraced hundreds of distinct religious, linguistic, and cultural groups and millions of peoples. Few other empires at that time in history could compare. From the mid-13th to the mid-14th century it was a major source of gold bullion for key European and Mediterranean states. Through its international market emporia passed prodigious quantities of gold, copper, ivory, kola, and slaves. Remarkably, a single Muslim dynasty, the Keitas, ruled over Mali and its vast imperial system from its foundation in about 1235 to its end in 1599, when it became a province of the Moroccan-ruled Songhai Empire.

For centuries, historians have speculated on the causes of the fall of this amazing sub-Saharan African state. The answer to this important and tantalizing question is multifaceted and it reveals so much about the reasons behind the collapse of many African states both past and present. There are lessons here that can be learned in today's globalized world.

#### Political

Let us first consider the political factors. The Keita dynasty was huge and after the death of Mali's most famous *mansa*, or ruler, the great Mansa Musa, intense rivalry among family members for leadership developed and plagued the empire for generations. The government and its council of powerful clan heads was never able to devise a clear-cut procedure for succession and the death of subsequent *mansas* too often was followed by civil war and divisive court intrigue. As the great British historian Roland Oliver observed, "trouble at the centre of the system was soon reflected in disintegration at the periphery."<sup>[1]</sup> As *mansas* became weaker power gradually passed from civilians to the military and by the 1370s most provincial governors were drawn from the ranks of the army and they became increasingly autonomous from the central government.

At the center, relations steadily deteriorated between the *mansa*, as head of state, and his executive council consisting of the heads of major royal lineages. It was the councillors who served as the kingmakers and who benefited most from the country's prosperity. As a counterweight, successive *mansas* created their own council, made up of titled slaves directly under their personal control. Even though this led to some empowerment of slaves it eroded the time-honored system of checks and balance. Not surprisingly, the two councils usually found themselves at odds when important state decisions had to be made and implemented. Mali had no written constitution but rulers and ruled in the early years of the empire were interdependent and operated under an unspoken compact of rules and procedures rooted in the past and informed by ancestral sanction. Yet what worked for small Mandinka kingdoms did not necessarily work for an expansive empire.

#### Economic

This leads us to a consideration of economic factors. The authority of successive *mansas* rested in large part on their powers of patronage and on their ability to collect tribute from provincial governors, to levy tolls on trade, and to use portions of the proceeds to enrich themselves in an aura of pomp and majesty while dispensing the remainder on their subjects in return for their service and loyalty. Large sums also had to be spent on maintaining a vast security apparatus so that key trade routes carrying gold and other valuables could be secure in order to ensure an unimpeded flow of commerce. As long as the key trade routes were safe Mali's economy flourished and nearly everyone, from foreign merchants to local miners, farmers, and artisans, prospered. And this at a time when much of Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East were convulsed in warfare, brigandage, and piracy. But by the late 15th century Mali was beset by a vicious circle. As the central government weakened, centrifugal tendencies accelerated and provincial governments and semi-autonomous tributary states beyond the heartland began to rebel.

On occasion, large armies, often numbering over 100,000, had to be mobilized and provisioned. Successive *mansas* could not afford these military burdens and debts began to mount. Security became an increasing problem and trade began to decline with the rise in communal violence and highway theft. Chronic civil warfare heightened the empire's vulnerabilities and led to slave and cattle raiding by local warlords. Fearful farmers and fishermen were less inclined to venture into their fields and streams and food production declined. Inexorably, the government's sources of revenue were compromised and diminished and the *mansas'* powers of patronage declined.

At first, signs of decline were not everywhere visible. The riverain cities of Jenne, Gao, and Timbuktu were growing in size and wealth. Architecturally, they had begun to take on characteristics of cities in North Africa and the Middle East with adobe-made rectangular domical buildings graced with spires and grand entrances. Some learned Muslims boasted of extensive personal libraries. Their best scholars studied abroad in Egypt, Tunis, and Saudi Arabia. Timbuktu, known by then among Europe's cognoscenti, had surpassed Walata as a major terminus of the trans-Saharan trade. Muslim and Jewish merchants and craftsmen conducted a vigorous international commerce in Timbuktu and in the oases towns along the caravan routes. In 1353 the celebrated and perceptive North African traveler, Ibn Battuta, was dazzled by the *mansa's* court and by the cosmopolitan nature of its central markets. He marveled at "the complete security that is enjoyed in the country" and noted that "travelers have nothing to fear of brigands, thieves, or plunderers." But he expressed concern over the *mansa's* tendency to compromise Islamic tenets by observing that females, including the *mansa's* own daughter, go " . . . nude and wear no veils over their faces." [2] Presciently, Battuta worried that Islam was losing its salience in Mali.

Southward, waves of itinerant Mande Dyula traders by 1400 had penetrated the Akan forest zone in what is today northwestern Ghana and were dealing in gold, kola nuts, and other forest products. Some of the merchants had taken local women as wives, started families, and introduced Islam into the local culture. A certain transformative metissage was underway though it didn't seem to be lending any coherence to the state itself. And while the Mande were expanding trade into the forest markets, the Mossi of the Upper Volta Basin were raiding villages and burning farms along the strategic Middle Niger region.

In the face of these seemingly positive though contradictory trends, the elites and the government were apparently spending and living beyond their means. Superficially, things looked good, but what of the fundamentals? Had Mali territorially over-extended itself? Had its leaders lost touch with the masses? Was the gap widening between the rich and poor, the urban dweller and the rural peasant? Were government leaders paying attention to the darkening clouds on the horizon? Or were they wasting energy on petty internecine struggles?

## **Environmental**

This dilemma of growing public indebtedness was compounded by a third factor in the empire's decline: environmental deterioration triggered by radical changes in weather conditions. During the heyday of Mali's golden era (ca. 1307–1359) the government successfully encouraged the cultivation of cotton for its textile industries and Niger and Senegambian River Valley aquaculture for its food markets. But by the early 15th century, water tables and subterranean aquifers were being depleted after a series of prolonged dry spells and rain-fed farming was becoming more problematic. Long periods of drought were occasionally interrupted by devastating floods and locust infestations. The climatic changes may have started as early as the 11th century and probably contributed to the fall of the Ghana empire. Progressive desertification in the Sahelian regions forced nomadic pastorals, the Berbers and Tuareg among them, to migrate southward in search of greener pastures for their cattle. Competition for land between the pastoralists and indigenous agriculturalists intensified and inevitably led to interethnic violence and population displacements.

We need to remember that even though the Mali Empire was politically dominated by ethnic Mande (Mandinka), most of its northern subjects were from other ethnic groupings and maintained their own identities, worldviews, and lifestyles. The empire was in reality a loose multiethnic confederacy held together by the office of *mansa* who had to use combinations of diplomacy, patronage, and sheer military force to hold the state together. Environmental degradation placed enormous strains on that fragile unity. Unlike its neighbor and successor, the Songhai Empire, the Malians apparently took no government measures to slow the southward movement of the desert. Clearly, they were unprepared for environmental change.

## Religion

Another strain arose from the empire's religious heterogeneity. While the Keita dynasty was fundamentally Muslim, as were most foreign traders from North Africa and the local urban populace, the overwhelming majority of Mali's population lived in rural areas and adhered to non-Islamic traditional beliefs and religious and legal customs. Though we think of the Mali Empire as a theocracy, Islam was in fact a thin veneer. This disquieting reality manifested itself in a divisive bifurcation of the empire and successive *mansas* had to walk a fine line between Islamic and non-Islamic worlds. Even the ancient legends that gave legitimacy to the Keita family sought to cast their ancestors as rooted in a pre-Islamic past. Sundiata, the 13th-century founder of the Mali Empire, was of non-Muslim lineage while his descendants went to great lengths to perform costly and ostentatious pilgrimages to Mecca, to build impressive mosques, and to attract leading Islamic scholars to Mali's cities like Timbuktu, Jenne, and Gao.

In some respects, the empire developed an identity problem. Typical of most African states, Mali had no surveyed boundaries or clearly-defined national frontiers: it was held together by what the historian Basil Davidson called a *regna*.<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed, the *mansa's* powers only extended to those scattered political entities within the vast and vaguely-delimited region of the western Sudan that recognized him as their suzerain by paying tribute, contributing to his huge army, and sending representatives to his regular state ceremonies at the capital.

Mali's acquired cultural diversity as it transitioned from a cohesive Mandinka kingdom to an empire was both a blessing and a curse. Under charismatic, tolerant, and wise *mansas* such diversity lent strength and social dynamism to the empire. Islam gave the empire a cosmopolitanism that enabled it to negotiate a world beyond West Africa. It brought literacy in Arabic, unified methods of financial accounting, a written code of law—the sharia—and a religion that could transcend all ethnic groups. Nevertheless, as the empire expanded and took new territories by brute force, government became more coercive and bureaucratic, and less efficient and accountable to its disparate subjects. Clientelism and nepotism became the way of politics. All the while, Islam, though tolerant and syncretic in many respects, could not be reconciled with time-honored and deeply-entrenched non-Islamic traditions. For many local leaders, Islam was a threat to their legitimacy and to their folkways. Islam fractured families as some converted and others did not. The change from matriarchy to patriarchy weakened the position of women in society and contributed to gender tensions and family instability. Moreover, the lighter-complexioned peoples of the northern margins of the empire oriented themselves towards North Africa and looked upon southerners with disdain. They viewed themselves as "white" and the lands of the savanna as *bilad al-sudan* or "the land of the blacks." In some respects this was analogous to the current ethnic crisis in the modern Republic of Sudan where Islamic northerners are pitted against non-Islamic southerners.

## Secession

Thus, as fissile tendencies gained momentum the northern tributaries began to break away and reassert their sovereignty. Mali lost control over the key trans-Saharan caravan routes and vital oases stations. Between 1590 and 1600 it also lost access to the gold-producing centers of Bure, Bambuk, and Wangara which even in the best of times were ruled only indirectly. Decades earlier Mali's rule over the towns and cities of the Middle Niger was weakening. The empire of Songhai to the east under Sunni Ali and his successors expanded its Niger River navy, seizing Timbuktu in 1473 and Jenne not long afterward. Then out of the north came the Moroccan invasion of the western Sudan in 1591 and the defeat of the Songhai Empire including its recently-acquired province of Mali. Already, many of Mali's southern lands had been taken by the kingdom of Wolof under its fast-moving cavalry.

Having lost its Sahelian and savanna provinces, including the prosperous inner Niger Delta, Mali reverted to its pre-13th-century status as a small Mandinka-ruled kingdom. Though the empire was no more, the Mandinka language and culture endured in the original heartland and a much-fractured Keita family continued to rule in numerous small disparate kingdoms and chieftaincies into the 17th century.

To this day, the great Sundiata legend is recounted in communities throughout Sudanic West Africa and the rich cultural legacy of the Mali Empire lives on.

**Notes:**

[1] Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore, *Medieval Africa: 1250–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 66.

[2] Robert O. Collins, ed., *African History: Text and Readings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 19–20.

[3] Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden* (New York: Random House/Times Books, 1999), 57.

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**MLA Citation**

Hull, Richard W. "The West African Empire of Mali: Decline and Fall." *The American Mosaic: The African American Experience*, ABC-CLIO, 2021, [africanamerican2.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/2044009?sid=2044010&cid=91](https://www.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/2044009?sid=2044010&cid=91). Accessed 25 Sept. 2021.