



The Sahel: The Empire of Mali

By Trevor R. Getz

A great grassland lies just south of Africa's vast Sahara Desert. It goes between and around the bend of the Niger River. This region is called the Sahel. It gave birth to many states, including three large kingdoms: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay. In this article, we'll talk about Mali.

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Geography and Environment

Mali's land was rich. It had many things that people needed to grow big communities. Millet, rice, and sorghum grew along the riversides. These plants became the main crops of the region. Domesticated cattle and goats provided meat and milk. Fish were a major source of food, too.

Malian society included fishers, herders, and farmers. These groups all came together to trade in cities. Most of the cities were along the Niger River. The cities were already quite large by the time Mali appeared.

The cities along the Niger River traded with many other parts of West and North Africa. The trade routes needed large **caravans** or groups traveling together. These groups were made up of people with goods to sell or trade. These people are called merchants. Caravans traveling north had to include camels. They were the only animals that could cross the Sahara Desert. Trade connected Mali to the world. It brought new ideas, such as **Islam**. Islam is a religion. Its followers are called Muslims. It brought new skills, such as reading and writing. And it brought new goods.

Still, a lot of the Sahel was a wilderness in the twelfth century CE. Hunters headed into this wilderness to hunt. These men were important members of society. They played a major role in the rise of Sunjata Keita, the first emperor of Mali.



The Mali Empire

1235 CE–1670 CE

2000 BCE

1500 BCE

1000 BCE

500 BCE

1

500 CE

1000 CE

1500 CE

2000 CE



A natural border

The map to the left is a part of the Catalan Atlas. It was created in Spain in the fourteenth century CE. This panel of the map shows the cities of Mali and its greatest emperor, Mansa Musa. The cities of Mali are shown south of a line that represents the Sahara Desert. North of that line is the coast of North Africa.

Detail from the Catalan Atlas, 1375.
© Getty Images.

Big Question #1:

How did geography and the environment shape the development of societies in the Sahel?

Political Structure

By the thirteenth century CE, Mali had been a small kingdom for a few hundred years. However, it had long been overshadowed by nearby Ghana. But around 1235 CE, Mali defeated its local enemies and took over the whole region. Sunjata Keita led this expansion. On his father's side, Sunjata came from a royal family. His mother was a highly respected spiritual leader. She came from a neighboring land whose **alliance** was needed.

Sunjata was forced out of Mali as a youth. This happened after a fight for power in his father's kingdom. There is a story told about his rise to power. In it, a hunter said that Sunjata would return. This



These are some of the many Islamic manuscripts found in Timbuktu, Mali. These manuscripts are written in Arabic, and some were written as early as the thirteenth century. © Getty images.

story might show us an important fact of the time—hunters were a powerful political force. They acted as a sort of military. During his time outside Mali, Sunjata gathered support by visiting all the neighboring communities. This part of the story gives us more important information. It tells us that the empire Sunjata built was made of partnerships with communities that neighbored his own.

The communities accepted Sunjata's rule. Together, they attacked and took over the big cities along the Niger River, including Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenne. In this way, Sunjata created a Malian empire. Sunjata's empire was large. Its people spoke different languages and had different cultures. Some were treated as conquered people and forced to work in Malian homes. Others were mostly allowed to rule themselves. Many of the conquered communities were Islamic. Some were allowed to keep their religion and customs. Some Islamic officials became politically powerful. Mansa Musa became emperor around 1312 CE. By then, power was shared—and sometimes fought over—between the emperor, Islamic rulers, and governors of the many regions. Within cities such as Timbuktu, the imperial governor had only limited power. The Islamic judge, the *qadi*, made most daily decisions.

■ **Big Question #2:**

What type of rulers did the Mali Empire have? How did they govern?

Culture

By the time of Mansa Musa, Mali was at a new height. By then, it was a largely Islamic society. It had large cities, schools, and important centers of learning. Islamic schools and scholars connected Mali with the larger Islamic world. The Malian empire was also linked to the outside world through trade. Mali was perfectly positioned to control the flow of trade goods—especially gold—from West Africa to North Africa. Caravans headed north through the big cities of the Niger River. They carried a lot of gold. They returned with needed goods. One of these needed goods was salt.

Islam was very important in Mali. However, the Islam practiced in the region was mixed with local beliefs. We know this partly from the stories of that time. The stories talked about ideas and practices of magic from the region. Muslim forms of worship were also mentioned.



An artist's depiction of Mansa Musa's journey to Egypt. © Getty images.

■ **Big Question #3:**

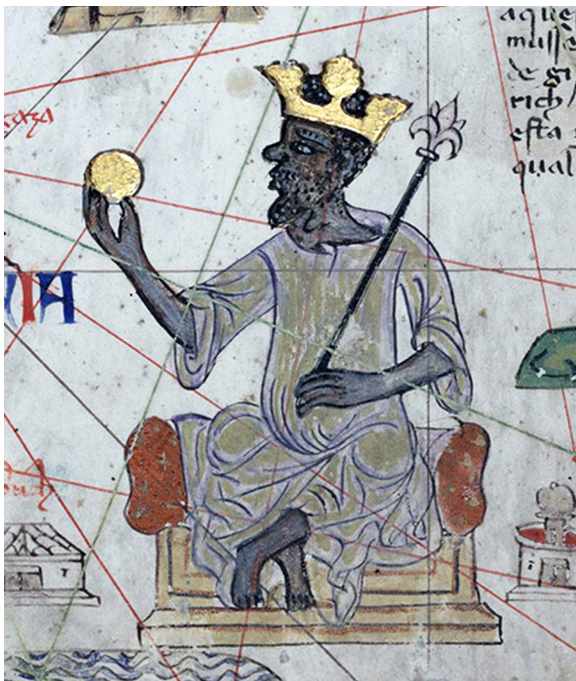
How was Mali's culture shaped by trade and geography?

Society

Even though Mali was mainly Muslim, women did not wear veils or have to stay at home. They could be friends with men who weren't members of their families. Women had a lot of freedom for this period. They even held some political power. They could inherit money and property. This wealth came from their parents and husbands.

The enslaved were at the bottom of society. Malian slavery was different from the slavery we know from the recent history of North America and Europe. Enslaved people could possess property. They could grow wealth. Many worked in Malian houses, although some raised crops or did other farm work. They were protected by many laws and often achieved their freedom. But they could not leave or move if they wanted to, and they could not easily be full members of society.

At the other end of the society was Mansa Musa. The emperor was at the very top of the **social hierarchy**. Islamic priests and judges also held positions of great power. By the early fourteenth century CE, Musa knew a lot about the world. He was interested in world politics and worked with rulers of North Africa and Egypt. He played an important role in promoting long-distance trade. He was a very religious Muslim. As a result, in 1324, he made a **pilgrimage** to Mecca, Islam's holiest city. A pilgrimage is a trip to a holy place. He traveled thousands of miles across North Africa and through Egypt. This was a diplomatic and trade trip. It was also a personal religious pilgrimage.



An expensive journey

Mansa Musa was a devout Muslim. In 1324 CE, he made a trip to Mecca, Islam's holiest site. Along the way, he spent a lot of gold on souvenirs and gifts. He spent so much that he changed the price of gold in Europe. You can see his portrait in the Catalan Atlas to the left. He is pictured with a golden crown and holding a golden coin.

■ **Big Question #4:**

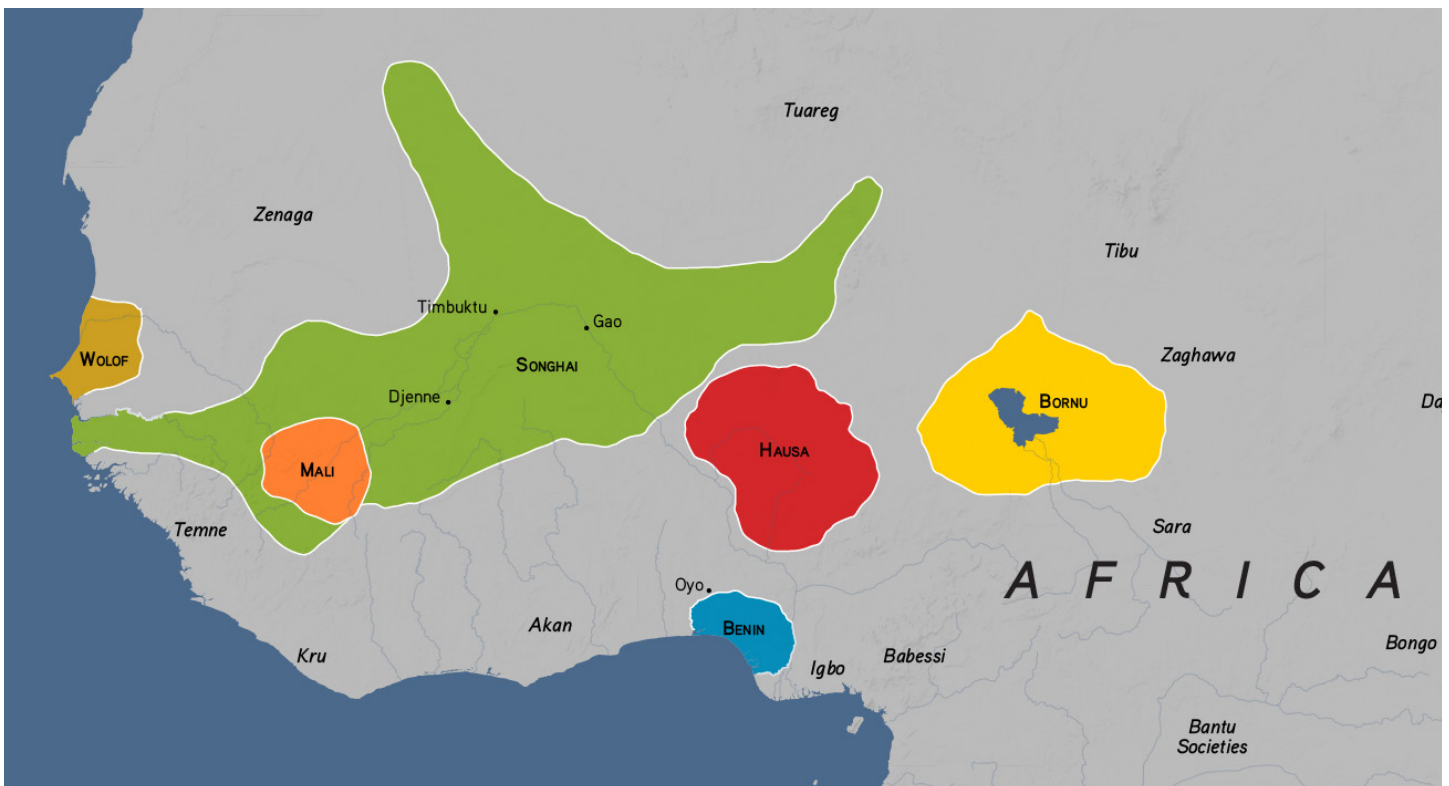
How was Mali's society organized? Who were at the top of the social hierarchy, and who was at the bottom?

Mansa Musa, King of Mali, holding a sceptre and a piece of gold as represented in the Catalan Atlas. © Getty Images.

Decline and Transformation

After the reign of Mansa Musa, Mali went into a slow decline. The center of trade moved toward the coast of West Africa. Within the Mali government, different groups began to fight about who should become emperor. A series of weak rulers made things worse. They left the state unable to rule its many people.

But as Mali declined, one of its conquered regions was on the rise. This was Songhay. The people of this region had a unified leadership in the fifteenth century CE. They had good access to trade routes and the support of some important Islamic scholars. The Songhay rulers also claimed to be related to the past emperors of Mali. So, it wasn't that there was a "collapse" in this region. Instead, power shifted to a different part of the Sahel. It stayed an important group of societies.



A map showing the borders of the Songhai Empire, which followed the decline of the Mali Empire. By WHP, CC BY 4.0.
[Explore more here.](#)

■ Big Question #5:

What led to the decline and transformation of the Mali Empire? What empire replaced it?

Trevor R. Getz

Trevor Getz is professor of African history at San Francisco State University. He has written 11 books on African and world history, including *Abina and the Important Men*. He is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

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A map showing the borders of the Songhai Empire, which followed the decline of the Mali Empire. Explore more here. <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/Images/WHP-Maps/1450-layer-2>



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